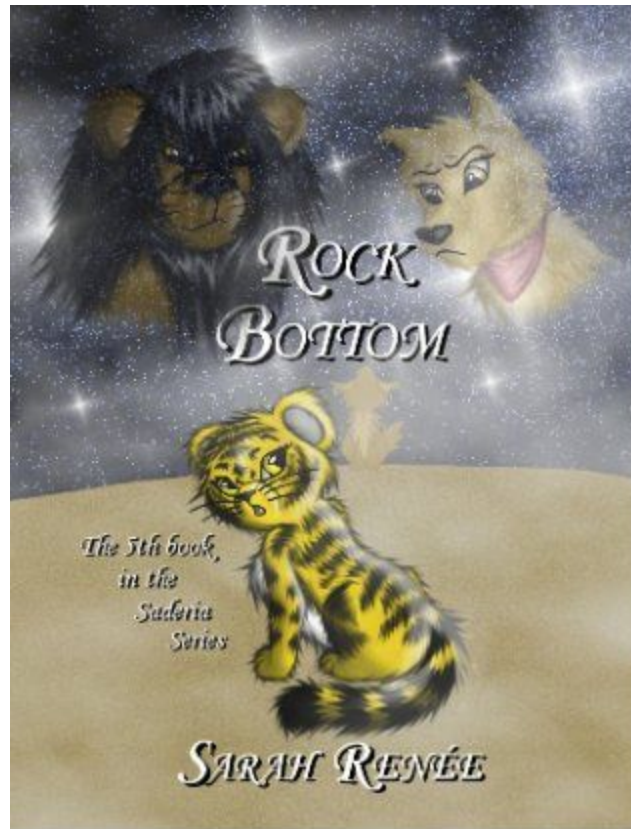


ROCK BOTTOM

*The 5th book
in the
Sadaria
Series*

SARAH RENÉE



Rock Bottom

The fifth book in the Saderia Series

Sarah Renée

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Chapter One

Alone

The Queen was alone. After all that had happened, after all the time she had spent watching her family members disappear, she was alone. A barren sea of sand dunes spread out in all directions. Mile upon mile of gritty light brown sand stretched out before her everywhere she looked. Boiling hot sunlight beat down on the grainy ground, making the entire land seem hazy. Simmering waves of heat curled up off the sand and rose up to the clear blue sky. A soft sigh breathed out of the Queen's throat. The entire world seemed to blur around her, making her stumble across the ground. Her shadowed amber eyes grew dull with defeat.

Too many days to count had passed under the blazing sun. Beat down by the piercing rays, she found herself stumbling aimlessly across the sand, her eyes half-closed and her vision blurry. Lack of sleep and lack of food had created dark bags under her eyes and made her ribs poke out of her gaunt sides, but she didn't care. The exhaustion and the hunger pains distracted her from thinking about her lost family. Considering she hadn't brought any food when she had left her broken home, the fact that she had actually survived this long surprised her. But somehow she had managed to keep herself alive by using the skills Saderia had taught her.

Saderia. The thought sent a jolt of pain shooting through her. Wincing, Karenisha tried to push the image of her daughter out of her mind, but it refused to go away. Salt rose in her throat like a bitter wave and she squeezed her eyes shut to try to block out the pain at the thought of Saderia. Saderia, her brave-hearted daughter with enough courage to put even the toughest warriors to shame. Saderia, the one who had used her bravery and wit to survive countless hard times—outrunning dangerous hunters, navigating the nearly endless desert, and fighting off blood-crazed dingoes. Saderia, the daughter she admired more than anyone. The daughter she had lost.

On all of her wild adventures, Saderia had been accompanied by Dash, her closest friend and Karenisha's adopted son. The dark lion had stuck by Saderia's side through thick and thin. More loyal than anyone, Dash probably would have died for Saderia. Both young animals had been through everything together and had worked together to overcome even the hardest obstacles. Whenever she had thought of them before, her chest would swell with pride, but now all she felt was sorrow.

Saderia and Dash were gone.

Who was to blame for their deaths? That question had haunted Karenisha throughout her journey. Someone had to be responsible for their fate. Was it only the hunters—who must have been the ones to kill them—who were solely to blame? Or was her own husband, Makero, partly to blame? After all, he had been foolish enough to leave their strange home and walk right into the hunters' territory in the hopes that they had left their old home. Saderia and Dash had followed him to their deaths.

Foolish or not, though, who could blame Makero for leaving the strange forest to investigate their old home? He hadn't known how badly things would turn out. Maybe the odd forest was to blame because of how unlivable it was. The strangeness of the forest had made the forest animals so desperate to leave that Makero had decided to journey all the way back to their old, hunter-infested forest to see if it was possible to move back home, only to find out that it wasn't.

More than anyone else, Karenisha blamed herself. She knew she should have stopped Makero from leaving to go to the old forest. Her Dreams and the instinctual premonitions that ran in her blood had hinted at the danger, but they hadn't been clear or powerful enough to warn her properly. Even so, she had still felt an unnerving, warning premonition when Makero had first decided to leave. At the time, she had passed off the feeling as just ordinary worry. That had been a mistake.

After Saderia and Dash had left to find Makero, Karenisha had wanted to hope that they would be okay. After all, they had brought along their canine friend, Dingo, who knew the desert inside and out. But that didn't matter. Not if they were purposely seeking out the hunters that had captured Makero. No matter how much Karenisha tried to fool herself, she couldn't deny it. There was no way Saderia and Dash could have survived.

Karenisha hadn't had a choice. Her only option had been to leave the forest, what was left of her family, and the citizens of the kingdom behind. She just couldn't take staying in that house any longer, with painful thoughts of her daughter, Dash, and Makero constantly running through her mind. Makero had left the forest in the hopes of making a better life for the forest animals. She had decided to do the same.

The only problem was that she didn't know where she was going or if there was anywhere *to* go. It didn't matter, though. All she wanted to do was get away from the strange forest and the painful memories it contained.

A strange, unnerving sensation suddenly shot through her, shattering her thoughts and making her look up sharply, her eyes wide with alarm. Fear washed over her and she froze in place, pricking her ears and looking around warily. The eerie, uncomfortable feeling of eyes boring into her back swept over her, making her fur prickle with discomfort. Alarm shone in her eyes. It felt as if she were being...watched.

A soft snicker sounded somewhere in the blurry, boiling haze of sand dunes. Her ears pricked up rapidly. Somewhere in the distance, she thought she could hear the faint murmur of voices. All the fur on her back stood on end. Feeling her heart skip with alarm, she pricked her ears and looked around wildly, but heard nothing. The desert was silent... Shaking her head, she pushed away her worry, telling herself she was just being paranoid and hearing things. Keeping her head down, she hastily started walking again and tried to ignore an uncomfortable premonition that something was off.

Despite her best efforts to ignore it, though, the uneasy feeling lingered. Images of the bloodthirsty, desert-dwelling dingoes flitted through her mind, raising all the fur on her back. The Queen tried to tell herself that there was nothing out there, but she still felt as if she was being watched by malevolent eyes. Swallowing hard, she slowly started walking, glancing surreptitiously over her shoulders at every step. Part of her wanted to run, but another part warned her not to draw any more attention to herself. Unease whirled through her mind. She was sure she heard a voice and a cruel laugh somewhere in the distance. Nervously, she picked up her pace.

Eyes seemed to bore into her from every direction. Shuffling warily through the sand, Karenisha told herself she was just hearing things, but she

couldn't shake off a lingering sense of unease. Out there, all alone, with no one left to defend her and no one left for her to lose, anything could happen.

In a sleepy, mystical world, a light brown spirit gazed down at a faraway land, her light brown eyes glimmering with worry. An eerie blue glow illuminated her shaggy light brown fur and cast an otherworldly light across the worn, pink ribbon tied around her neck. Sleepy, ghost-like sand dunes spread out all around her, seeming even more endless than the desert of the living world. Nothing stirred in the silent, dream-like desert. A heavy sigh escaped the spirit's mouth.

Already, she could tell things weren't going to end well. Nonetheless, she watched the vision of the living world's desert closely, afraid of what she might see but determined to know the outcome. Sympathy gleamed in her light brown eyes as she took in the ragged tiger in the scene below her. She knew how the tiger Queen felt. Even after so much time had passed, she still missed her living brother as much as the tiger missed her supposedly dead family.

As the ghost dingo watched, a memory nagged at her mind—a strange memory of another spirit she had seen just that day. The other eerie spirit had been watching the same tiger she was now watching. Why he had been watching Saderia's mother, she didn't know, but a dark instinct told her it wasn't for anything good. A cold sense of trepidation washed over her at the thought of the strange spirit. Something about him was very off.

Another memory haunted her mind, making her think of another strange animal she had been watching. A living being rather than a ghost, the other animal was a dusty dark brown, long-haired dingo, one she knew would cause lots of problems. The fact that he was plotting something dangerous was obvious. What that plot was and what it involved was not... Yet. For days, she had watched the dingo control his newly acquired minions and order them to search for her brother to kill him. The thought made her shiver. That dingo was planning something. She knew it...She just didn't know what it was. What a pity she couldn't see the future...

The strange spirit she had seen, combined with the dusty dingo and the lost Queen, spelled out a very ominous future. The light brown dingo glanced back down at the tiger and bit her lip. Already, she could tell that

Saderia's future was going to get rough. Claw winced as she stared down at the tiger, then squeezed her eyes shut. "This is going to get messy..."

Sunlight shimmered down on the boiling hot sand of the desert, illuminating the fur of a gaunt, yellow brown dingo. Pain shadowed his dark brown eyes. A crowd of gaunt, nervous dingoes sat in front of him on the flat, simmering ground, their fur messy and unkempt and their eyes shadowed with weakness, exhaustion, and pure fear. A weary sigh escaped the yellow brown canine's throat. In all his life, he had never seen dingoes look so pitiful and afraid, but considering their miserable situation, he couldn't blame them for their fear. Hopelessness haunted him just looking at them and knowing they were but a shadow of their former selves. None of them could put up a fight to save their lives—something that could prove deadly in their current position.

Never before had the yellow brown dog felt as hopeless as he did now. Thunder didn't know what he could do to save the other dingoes. Until now, he had never known that desert life could be so cruel...but now he realized that it always had been. He just hadn't been able to see it in time.

Dingo had been able to see it. Guilty memories of the exiled different dingo hated by the pack burned in the yellow brown canine's mind. Last he had heard, Dingo was still alive and living with the forest food, so maybe after all those years of suffering, he finally had a decent life. Thunder hoped so. Now that he realized just how cruel the pack was, he couldn't help but remember all the evil things they had done to Dingo. How he had survived was a mystery to Thunder. Now that he knew the truth, the yellow brown dingo doubted he could survive the next week, much less the full twelve years Dingo had survived. His belly was thin and gaunt from months of hunger, his body was haunted by exhaustion, and his mind was plagued with defeat.

Thunder gazed out at the outcasts before him. All of their faces were twisted with hopelessness and desperation. Thunder wished he could help them, but he didn't know how. All he knew was that they couldn't go on like this.

"Someone help us," Thunder murmured. "Please, before it's too late..."

Chapter Two

Home

Endless sand spread out for miles in every direction. Heat waves seemed to rise off the dry, desert floor, making the light brown landscape seem fuzzy and surreal. Boiling sunlight beat down on the grainy land. Saderia heaved a sigh as she trudged through the desert sand. Her paws ached, her stomach rumbled, and her eyelids drooped with exhaustion, but all of it paled in comparison to the pain in her heart. All the forest animals of her kingdom followed confidently behind her. Glancing back at them, she took a deep breath and told herself to be strong for their sake. She knew she should be happy, anyway. After all, it had been a week since they had started their journey back to their old home.

Her amber eyes gleamed with determination at the thought. With every step she took, she got closer to her old home. Her paws itched with the desire to move faster in her anticipation to reach her forest, but she forced herself to walk at a steady pace. After all, her job was to lead the forest animals home. The thought brought back a renewed sense of determination that drove away her despair.

Taking in her surroundings, she felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. All around her was nothing but endless light brown sand sloping up to form rolling sand dunes. Long ago, the desert had seemed like a horrible place—and it still *was* dangerous—but after crossing it so many times, it seemed almost welcoming. At least it was familiar. Not to mention, the desert was the site of some of her happiest memories. The desert was where she had met one good friend and brought the rest of her friends together for the first time.

Smiling a weak smile, she glanced around at her three friends. Dash, her closest friend, walked close beside her, his dark brown mane hanging down in front of his tired amber eyes. Despite the fact that Dash was the son of Dastarius, the dark lion who had once tried to destroy her, she trusted him with her life. No matter what, he was always there for her.

Up ahead walked Dingo, a canine with a disposition as dry as the desert he came from. Her desert friend could be a bit hard to like at first, but he always had their best interests at heart. His bristly brown fur looked as wild and unruly as ever, but his light brown eyes were shadowed. Even a year later, the pain of losing his sister, Claw, still haunted him and darkened his scarred face. The shadow clouding his eyes had only grown darker when he had killed his oldest brother, Bone, to protect Saderia and Dash and left his other brothers, Rip and Tear, behind. Time had healed most of his wounds, though. Stronger and happier with his friends, the desert dog had agreed to lead Saderia and the forest animals across the vast desert to their old home. For the past week, he had walked at the front of the crowd of forest animals, leading the way home.

Beside her walked her other friend, Jeb, who was possibly the strangest creature she had ever seen. With bright yellow fur, pitch black tiger stripes, and a orange, lion-like tail tuft, Jeb was anything but ordinary. His feet were covered with green webbing and his eyes were two different colors—blue and green. Years ago, humans had created his strange breed, kraguers, during a series of chemical experiments. The tiny kraguer's eyes shone with unease from traveling with so many 'strange creatures,' but otherwise he seemed at ease. A fearful creature, Jeb was easy to scare, but he was starting to feel more comfortable around Saderia's kind.

Jeb's parents, Telku and Jati, walked a few paces behind him, seeming unnerved by such strange creatures. The nervous kraguers jumped at every noise and seemed painfully out of place. From the curious looks the forest animals gave Jeb and his family, it was clear the kingdom thought the kraguers were strange, but after traveling alongside them for so long, they had more or less gotten used to them. Back at Jeb's forest, Makero had held a meeting to introduce Jeb and explain that he planned to travel to the old forest with them. The King had also announced the return of Dingo and explained that he would live in the forest, as well. Dingo didn't seem all that thrilled about living in the forest, but he did at least seem happy to be living close to Saderia and Dash.

The forest King himself walked close beside Saderia and Dash, his green eyes shadowed with pain and regret. As the forest's King, Makero's duty was to lead the kingdom home safely. For the forest's sake, Makero

put on a strong, determined façade, but when Saderia looked closely, she could see the misery that had haunted him since his wife's disappearance.

Days had passed since Karenisha had gone missing. In the months before, Saderia and the forest animals had lived in Jeb's forest on the eastern end of the desert. A strange land with odd, multicolor plants and random disasters, Jeb's forest had been nearly unlivable. Desperate to return home, Makero had one day decided to cross the desert to their old forest to see if they could go back. Before he could return to deliver the good news that their old home was safe, though, the King had been captured by humans in the desert. Believing Makero to be dead, Saderia's mother, Queen Karenisha, had fallen into deep depression. Later on, when Saderia had set out into the desert to search for her father with the help of her friends, Karenisha had believed that they too had journeyed to their deaths. Out of desperation, the Queen had run away from her home and hadn't returned. No one knew where she could possibly be.

Saderia's head drooped with sorrow at the thought of her mother. Somewhere out in the wild, dangerous world, she was alone. Was she in trouble? Was she even still *alive*? A shiver raced down her spine and she shook the thoughts forcefully out of her head. She couldn't afford to think like that. No matter what, she had to think positive and keep looking forward. She couldn't just lay around, moping—she had to do something to find her mother, wherever she might be. The only problem was that she had no idea where Karenisha was or where to start looking.

Hopelessness clouded Saderia's amber eyes. Heaving a sigh, she weakly raised her head to look up when she felt Dash brush reassuringly against her side.

The dark lion gave her a weak smile. "Don't worry," he murmured. "Karenisha's strong and we'll find her somehow. She might even be at home, waiting for us."

Saderia smiled, trying to match his fake optimism. "Maybe." Vaguely, she wondered if Karenisha really *could* be at their old home. After all, her mother had missed their home more than anybody, so the old forest seemed a likely place for her to go. Something told her that possibility was highly unlikely, though.

Heaving a sigh, Saderia crept forward to walk beside Dingo. "Do you know how long it will be until we get to our old forest?" she

murmured. Despite her familiarity with the desert, it was still an uncomfortable journey and she wanted it to be over. Even though she had grown used to the heat, her fur still felt hot and the sand still stung her eyes.

Dingo flicked her lightly with his tail and grinned. "Look over that sand dune."

Saderia frowned in confusion. Hesitantly, she bounded forward with Dash close beside her while the rest of the forest followed behind her. When they reached the top of the nearest sand dune, Saderia let out a gasp and felt her heart stop in disbelief. Their forest home lay right in front of them, as beautiful and majestic as ever. Bright green grass met the desert sand mere feet away. Beyond the forest border, a lush, rustling canopy of leaves spread out for miles. On the edge of the dense woods was a long line of thick, proud trees reaching out with leafy branches to welcome them home.

Gasps of amazement rang out behind her as the forest animals climbed to the top of the dune behind her and saw the forest for the first time in a long time. Screaming in excitement, the forest animals streamed down the dune on either side of her and raced toward the forest in one big, howling crowd. Joy lit up Saderia's eyes and her tail curled up happily at the sight of her old forest. Relief crashed over her like a wave, along with a burning sense of pride at having brought the forest animals home. Warm memories filled her head as she stared at the forest. The thought of seeing her old den, sleeping in her soft bed, eating breakfast at her familiar dining table...All of it seemed so overwhelming she could barely process it. Finally...after months of living in Jeb's forest and weeks of traveling...finally she was home...

Dash, Dingo, and Jeb stepped up to stand beside her. Happiness was written all over Dash's face. No matter where they had gone, this forest had always been their home.

Saderia let out a dreamy sigh. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"It sure is," Dash murmured, his eyes misty and dream-like.

Dingo snorted and raised an eyebrow. "If you say so."

Saderia frowned, feeling a twinge of worry. "You'll be able to adjust to forest life, right? I mean, it's really not that bad..."

"I'll be fine." Dingo flicked her lightly with his tail and smiled. "So long as you guys untangle me from vines every now and then."

She gave him a warm smile. "All right. Thanks for leading us back home."

Dingo shrugged lightly. "It was nothing. I'm just glad none of the dingoes saw us. Maybe they stayed away because there were a lot of animals with us."

"I'm glad, too," Saderia agreed, thinking darkly of the cruel dingoes of the pack that hated 'forest food' like herself and who wanted nothing more than a taste of Dingo's blood. Rock, the newest pack Leader, seemed determined to hunt Dingo down, but so far, they had been able to avoid him. Pushing thoughts of the desert out of her mind, she stared dreamily out at her old home, then blinked in surprise when she felt a hesitant tap on her shoulder. Turning, she saw Jeb gaze up at her with wide, uneasy blue/green eyes.

"Um, I know I wanted to go here, but...it's so weird," Jeb murmured, looking anxiously down at his paws. "There's nothing dangerous in there, right?"

"No, nothing dangerous," Saderia assured him, giving him a gentle smile. "I know it seems big and strange now, but once you get used to it, you'll be fine. Dash and I will show you and Dingo around until you get the hang of it."

"Okay," he murmured, his eyes doubtful and nervous. "What about the other...animals? They keep looking at me."

"That's only because you're...well, really, *really* different." Dash flicked him lightly with his tail. "They'll get used to you in time. And I doubt any of them will hurt you."

"Right." Saderia smiled warmly. "Most of the animals here are nice."

"Sounds nice," Dingo muttered, staring out at their forest with a dark, unreadable expression.

Saderia gave him a curious glance, then looked back at the sound of paw steps just in time to see Makero step up behind them.

The King wore a weak, falsely confident smile. "Come on, you four. We should get going." Catching the uneasy gazes of Dingo and Jeb, he smiled, "Oh, and don't worry about fitting in, you two. It'll take time, but the forest will come to accept you."

Dingo raised an eyebrow disbelievingly, but said nothing and instead turned to follow the shrieking crowd of forest animals down the sand dune. Alongside him, Saderia and her companions trotted down the dune in the direction of the forest.

Jeb hesitantly glanced up at Makero as they walked, seeming to want to say something but holding back. Seeing his anxious expression, Makero smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, Jeb. I've told Cia and Jash to talk to your parents. They'll show them around after the meeting, while Saderia, Dash, and I show you and Dingo the forest."

Jeb blinked in surprise, then managed a nervous smile. "Th-Thank you," he stammered.

Saderia looked up at her father with curious amber eyes. "So you're going to hold a meeting once we get there?"

The King nodded absently. "Yes, I'll have all the forest animals gather in the old meeting place and wait there while I send out a small group of animals to search the forest for anything dangerous the hunters might have left behind. In the meantime, you and Dash can calm them all down and make sure no one wanders away from the meeting place, in case there is something dangerous out there."

"All right." Saderia gave him a faint smile. "We'll do our best."

Makero nodded gratefully, then picked up his pace and darted off ahead of them. "I have to make sure they don't all run off!" he called over his shoulder, racing hastily through the wild crowd of forest animals. "Meet me at the meeting place!"

"We will!" Saderia shouted back. With a soft sigh, she watched Makero race into the crowd and vanish from sight, leaving her and her friends alone to follow the throng of animals into the forest.

Jeb frowned and looked up curiously at the woods. "What's it like in your forest?"

Saderia shrugged absently. "There's more...advanced stuff than what you had back in your forest, Jeb. I'll show you what I mean when we get there. But other than that, it's just like your forest, only without the disasters and with plants and trees that are mostly all green."

He nodded nervously and tried not to shrink back in unease. "All right..."

Saderia gave him an encouraging smile, then turned back to face her forest. Excitement burned in her heart when her paws brushed the soft grass of her home. Her eyes flicked up to gaze out at the forest around her and her heart skipped a beat. Towering, rustling trees rose up in front of her, casting a peaceful shade over the woods. Thick, puffy bushes rose up from the wild grass, hiding the shadowed woods behind clumps of undergrowth. Forest animals darted into the woods on all sides of her, their paws thudding against overgrown grass and their bodies rustling through dense undergrowth. The excited murmur of conversation rose up from the animals as they streamed into the thick woods. A soft wind rustled through the leaves, tousling her fur.

Happiness glowed in Saderia's eyes and her heart beat faster with excitement. She could hardly believe she was *finally* home where she could *finally* have her old life back. Her whole body felt like it was going to explode from anticipation. With her special instincts, she could sense the happiness burning in Dash and could feel the soft gleam of excitement shining underneath Jeb's fear. Their excitement only made hers feel stronger.

Out of nowhere, a strong jolt of pain flashed through her mind, chasing away the happiness and making her eyes open wide with shock. Blinking in surprise, she looked up just in time to see Dingo gaze forlornly back at the desert one last time before stepping into the forest, his light brown eyes clouded and dull. Regret glimmered in his shadowed brown irises. Saderia's eyes clouded with sympathy. As cruel as it was, the desert was Dingo's home, the land he had grown up in. Despite all the pain it had caused him, it must still be hard for him to leave everything he knew behind. Heaving a weary sigh, Dingo tore his gaze off the sand and slunk into the forest alongside them. Saderia crept closer to him and rested her tail sympathetically on his shoulder. The desert dog glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then shrugged off her tail and stalked into the forest with a sigh.

"He'll be fine," Dash murmured, padding closer to her and seeing the dark, worried look in her eyes. "He'll get used to the forest."

She heaved a heavy sigh. "I hope so." Her excitement kindled again when she looked up at her forest, but the feeling was tinged with her own

sense of regret. Karenisha should have been with them to see the kingdom's return to their true forest home.

Noticing her shadowed expression, Dash narrowed his eyes in a flash of determination. "We'll find Karenisha, too. I promise."

Saderia managed a weak smile. "I guess we're even now. You can read my mind just as much as I can read yours."

He flicked her gently with his tail and smiled. "Yep, we're finally even."

A playful spark glowed in Saderia's eyes. Because of a special power that ran in her family, she could usually feel what Dash was feeling and sometimes even read his thoughts. After being friends for so long, some of her ability had started to 'rub off on him,' so now he could read her thoughts, too. After all they had been through together, though, they probably didn't even need special instincts to know how they were feeling.

Saderia flicked Dash lightly with her tail, then turned to lead the way to the old meeting place. Good and bad memories alike arose at the thought of the meeting place. Good memories of the time she had announced her rescue of her parents and the time she had welcomed Dash into the royal family were connected to the meeting place. Unfortunately, it also held bad memories of when the forest animals had first left the forest and changed their lives forever. Still, the wide clearing was a peaceful place where the forest gathered to hear news and see the entire royal family... Only now, the entire royal family wouldn't be there. Queen Karenisha wouldn't be standing up on the stage with her family members. The thought made Saderia's eyes darken with regret.

Pushing the negative thoughts out of her mind, she marveled at the trees she passed, taking in the natural green color of the leaves. It was a welcome change from the strange, unnaturally colored trees and shrubs of Jeb's forest. The grass under her paws felt soft and welcoming, though it had grown wilder and more prickly since the forest animals had left. An odd silence hung over the forest. Most of the tiny woods animals, like birds and squirrels, must have fled or hidden when the hunters came. Missing the peaceful birdsong and the bright chattering of the squirrels, she hoped they would return soon.

Walking close beside her, Jeb gazed at the forest around them with eyes wide with amazement. Behind him, Dingo kept his gaze locked on the

ground, concentrating on not tripping over roots. Every now and then, he cut his eyes to the side to peer out at his new home, his light brown irises glimmering with incredulity. Despite his efforts to hide it, Dingo looked as intimidated as Jeb. On Saderia's other side, Dash walked along eagerly, gazing around at the forest with shining amber eyes and smiling whenever he saw something familiar. After hours of walking, the rough, overgrown terrain started to seem more familiar. Excitement and recognition gleamed in Saderia's eyes as she wove through the thick, shaded trees and darted deeper into the heart of the forest.

"The town's over that way!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining with amazement. "And the school's right over that way!"

Filled with excitement, the tiger Princess practically skipped through the wild woods. It was all coming back to her. All the times she had raced down the dirt path leading from her house into town...She had overlooked the dirt path before, but now she realized she had missed it almost as much as everything else. Thoughts of her home swirled through her mind. The woods rising up on either side of the dirt path, the town with all the familiar shops, the clearing in front of her school...it was all coming back to her. Excitement glowed in her eyes and she felt like leaping with joy at the thought of getting it all back. With a bright smile, she gazed out at the woods around her, expecting to be greeted with nothing but familiar sights. When she actually stopped to look at the forest, though, her high spirits began to fade. The hunters had left behind signs of their presence that she now recognized. Some trees were covered with ragged holes from stray gunshots. Some had even collapsed from the blast. Memories of the way her town had looked when she had left it flickered through her mind. The once peaceful town had been broken, overgrown, raided by desperate forest animals, and abandoned. Destroyed.

Her heart sank. After the forest animals had left the forest, it had probably only gotten worse. For the first time, she realized just how damaged the forest was and just how much work it might take to repair it. If repairing it was even possible...

Taking a deep breath, she tried to push the thoughts out of her head. Ignoring the fear creeping up her spine, she pushed through a thick clump of undergrowth and broke out into the enormous clearing of the old meeting place. Her heart sank at the sight of it. The trees bordering the clearing were

riddled with bullets and the woodsy outskirts of the grassy clearing were covered with fallen, rotted trees. Faint, muddy footprints covered the wild grass. The scent of rotted wood and smoke floated through the air, trapped in the wide clearing by the thick canopy of leaves overhead. Saderia's heart ached at the sight of the once proud clearing. Taking a deep breath, she tried not to let it get her down. After all, she could hardly have expected the forest to be in perfect shape.

Animals poured into the clearing from the wild outskirts of the woods and settled down on the bristly grass, nearly filling the entire clearing. Anxious murmurs spread through the huge crowd of forest animals as they sat back on the shaded ground. Their faces glowed with joy at being back in their old forest. A few looked around curiously, as if eager to check out their old homes. At the same time, a dark undercurrent of fear and unease seemed to hang over the clearing. Worry shone on the faces of the forest animals as they wondered just how bad a shape the forest was in. Still others cast curious, distrustful glances at her two strange friends, Dingo and Jeb. Uncomfortable, Jeb shuffled closer to his friends and shrank back to hide from the forest animals' eyes. Dingo didn't bother to hide. Preoccupied with gazing curiously out at the woods, he didn't notice the animals' eyes boring into his fur. Or if he did, he gave no indication.

Jeb looked around cautiously, trying to hide the fear in his blue/green eyes. "So this is where you hold meetings and stuff?"

Saderia nodded absently. "Yeah. Cia and Uncle Jash usually call all the animals to the meeting. When the meeting starts, the King and..." Her voice trailed off and her eyes clouded with a twinge of sorrow at the thought of her mother. "...The King and...Queen jump to a tree branch to speak..."

Dash rested his tail gently on her shoulder, reading the pain in her voice. "We'll find her."

Saderia let out a soft sigh, offering Dash a faint smile. "I hope so." Dingo gave her a sympathetic glance. "If you need me to lead you back through the desert to look for her, just say so. I'd be happy to do it."

"Yeah," Jeb murmured, trying to hide his unease. "Whenever you want to look for her, just say so and I'll come...even if it's scary. I...I'll try to help in any way I can."

Saderia offered them a grateful smile. “Thanks. I really appreciate it. And I think we will look for her eventually...but first, we have to get the forest sorted out.”

Dash flicked her lightly with his tail and smiled. “Just know we’re here for you.”

Saderia smiled and flicked him back, then looked up sharply in surprise when a loud, booming sound echoed out over the clearing. A loud roar erupted from the front of the clearing, making every animal look up in surprise. Makero sat on one of the low branches of the ancient trees towering at the head of the meeting place, his expression calm. A determined gleam lit up his eyes, and to any unknowing observers, he looked like the proud leader he had always been. The sadness and fear behind his confident façade were feelings only Saderia could detect.

Around the clearing, the forest animals grew quiet and turned around to face the King, their eyes wide with hope and curiosity. A tense silence slowly crept over the clearing until not a single animal spoke. Sitting on the wild, overgrown edge of the woodsy clearing, Cia and Uncle Jash turned to face the King. Instead of sitting near the front by Makero, they kept close to the edges of the clearing where Jeb’s parents sat. The two vibrant yellow kraguers mingled and whispered anxiously to Saderia’s aunt and uncle even as the rest of the clearing grew silent. From the sympathetic looks on Cia and Uncle Jash’s faces, it seemed they were trying to reassure the frightened kraguers.

At the head of the meeting, Makero gazed appraisingly around the clearing, then took a deep breath and raised his voice to let his words echo out over the meeting place. “Finally, we are home...I know I speak for everyone when I say that it is great to be back in our forest. I know many of you are eager to go to your homes, as well. But first, we must be sure that the hunters haven’t left any unpleasant surprises for us. I need you all to stay in this clearing while a patrol of animals investigates the rest of the forest for anything dangerous. I’ve already chosen several reliable animals and sent them out. It might take a while for them to return, so please be patient and wait here until they come back and give us a clear picture of what the rest of the forest is like. Also, I would like to remind everyone to be friendly to our newcomers, Dingo and Jeb. They may look different and they may come from different backgrounds, but they are as much a part of

this forest as any of us, and you should treat them no different.” The King gazed sternly around at the forest animals, then stepped back and bunched his muscles to leap down from the thick branch. “Wait here, and if you have any concerns, feel free to talk to me or any member of the royal family.”

Without another word, Makero jumped down from the tree and landed neatly on the thick grass below. Immediately, forest animals swarmed around him, their faces bright with curiosity and their questioning voices raising to a loud murmur. Looking over the heads of the forest animals, Makero met Saderia’s eyes and gave her a small smile. Seconds later, he disappeared behind the crowd.

Saderia heaved a long sigh and reluctantly sat back on the overgrown edge of the clearing to wait for the patrol to return. More than anything, she wanted to race to her old home and check it out immediately, but she knew Makero didn’t want anyone to leave the clearing. Definitely not his own daughter. Trying to ignore her growing impatience, she kept close to her friends and restlessly watched the forest animals pad through the clearing, talking or heading toward Makero with questions. The soft murmur of voices rose in the air along with the faint thud of anxious paw steps. After several long minutes of waiting, Saderia found herself searching the crowd for familiar faces. It wasn’t long before she picked out Loki’s spotted face. The cheetah and her friend, Lisa, sat near the back of the clearing in the shade of several tall oak trees, chatting and gazing around the crowded clearing with sparkling eyes. Looking up, Loki caught Saderia’s eye, blinked in surprise, then grinned and bounded over to her with shining green irises.

“Hey!” Loki skidded to a halt in front of Saderia and flashed a haughty/friendly smile. “I didn’t get a chance to talk to you during the journey. How have you been?”

A bright grin lit up Saderia’s face. “Hi, Loki. I’ve been good. I’m so glad to finally be home.”

Loki’s green eyes gleamed with excitement. “Me too.” The cheetah paused, then glanced anxiously at her paws, her smile faltering and her eyes darkening with unease. “Although...some of the leopards are kind of nervous about what our home will look like when we get there, and how bad the damage will be. After all, the hunters did start there.”

Saderia shivered. The hunters had first shown up in Twisted Creek Woods, a normally peaceful wood that sat on the outskirts of the Home of the Leopards where Loki and Lisa lived. Sympathy flashed in Saderia's eyes at the thought of the destruction that might be waiting for them in the Home of the Leopards, but she tried to hide her doubts and unease. "Whatever's happened, I'm sure we can fix it."

Loki managed a weak smile. "Yeah, we've always managed before. We'll get by. So...how are you holding up?"

Saderia winced and looked away, her eyes darkening. "Fine...It still hurts to think that my Mom's missing and I'm still worried, but I know she's out there somewhere. She has to be." She paused, then looked up with eyes shining with determination. "I'm thinking about leaving to try to find her soon, but I don't know when I'll get the chance."

Loki gave her a sympathetic flick of her tail. "I hope you do find her. I know it would be rough for me if my Mom...well, you know."

"Yeah..." Shaking herself, Saderia offered her a faint smile and tried to keep her expression impartial. "So have you seen any of the others?"

Loki nodded eagerly. "Yeah. Lisa and I saw Lizzie and Lily a few seconds ago. They're...kind of different. I haven't been able to talk to them much, but once everything goes back to normal, I guess we'll be in the same class again. It's going to be weird seeing Lizzie with only half a tail."

Saderia winced. Half of Lizzie's tail had been severed by a metal trap the hunters had set in the woods many months ago. It was strange to see the prissy lioness with only half a tail, but she certainly wasn't going to say anything even if she and Lizzie had been enemies in the past.

Dash frowned and narrowed his eyes curiously. "Are they doing okay?"

Loki shrugged. "Yeah, they seem fine. Everything seems fine. Things are good."

Dash grinned and eagerly flicked his tail. "That's good. How's Tawny?"

A glimmer of hope crept into Saderia's eyes at the thought of the cute, playful leopard cub called Tawny. The tiny cub lived in Loki's neighborhood, the Home of the Leopards, under the care of her aunt, Maeta, the leader of the leopards. Tawny's mother, Marlina, had died giving birth and her father, Hateko, had been killed by a hunter. An orphan before she

could even speak, Tawny had been taken in by her mother's sister, Maeta. Now that she was older, Tawny believed Maeta was her mother. Too young to know the dark circumstances of her birth, the cub was always friendly and cheerful and seemed to brighten everyone's mood wherever she went.

Loki grinned and chuckled warmly. "Tawny's doing fine. She's bouncing around and swatting at tails and everything. She's learning all kinds of new words, too."

"That's great." Saderia smiled a brilliant smile, while Dash nodded appreciatively.

"Yeah, it is." Loki grinned and flicked her playfully with her tail. "But hey, aren't you going to introduce me to your friends?"

Saderia chuckled and flicked her ears in embarrassment. "Oh, yeah, sorry." Flicking her tail, she glanced back at her two foreign friends and gestured to each of them with a nod of her head. "Loki, this is Dingo and Jeb. Dingo and Jeb, this is Loki."

"Hey," Loki replied in a light, casual tone, giving them a friendly wave. The cheetah/leopard didn't seem as bothered by their strange appearances as the other animals. She barely even seemed to notice. Typical Loki.

"Hi..." Dingo frowned in confusion and studied Loki curiously, seeming surprised by her indifference to his 'strangeness.' Beside him, Jeb squeaked out a nervous greeting and huddled closer to his friends, his blue/green eyes clouded with fear.

Loki grinned. "I'm glad you guys came to the forest. I hope you like it here."

Dingo blinked in surprise, then nodded slowly. "We're glad to be here."

Loki grinned and started to reply, then broke off abruptly when a loud, sharp voice shouted from across the clearing, calling her name. Wincing, Loki shrugged and offered them a sheepish smile. "That was my Mom. I guess I need to get back..."

Saderia smiled warmly. "All right. Hopefully, we'll see each other again soon."

"Right. I'll talk to you guys later. Bye, Saderia. Bye, Dash. You too, Dingo and Jeb." Giving them a friendly wave and a bright smile, Loki

whirled around and raced back toward the edge of the clearing, her tawny, spotted fur blurring with speed.

When she vanished into the thick, anxious crowd of animals swarming around the clearing, Saderia sat back and let out a heavy sigh. Her tail twitched with impatience. Already, several hours had passed since Makero's announcement and she was eager for the patrol to return. If she could just get home, see her old house just once...then she would be happy. Until the patrol returned, though, that wasn't going to happen.

Sitting close beside her, Dingo narrowed his eyes and leaned down close to her, a dubious gleam in his light brown eyes. "So how is this going to work? Where am I going to live?"

Jeb pricked his ears and glanced up at them nervously, his blue/green eyes narrowed with unease. "I was wondering that, too..."

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes in thought. "Well, we'll obviously give you a house to live in. You should probably live close to us, so we can help you get used to the forest. I think there's a few empty houses just beyond the woods surrounding our house, if I remember right. I'll probably get a chance to show you a few different places where you could stay later."

"Okay," Dingo muttered, his eyes doubtful but his expression cool.

Jeb gave them a grateful glance but said nothing, his eyes shadowed with unease.

Seeing the doubt in their eyes, Saderia started to offer more encouragement, then broke off when a loud, thundering roar echoed from the front of the clearing. Her eyes widened in surprise and she instantly whipped around to face the front of the enormous meeting place. Her heart skipped with hope. Makero sat atop a thick, dark brown branch high in the trees towering on the edge of the clearing. A cool gleam lit up his green eyes as he gazed around at the forest animals in the clearing. A group of animals sat in the wild grass at the base of the tree, making Saderia's eyes widen with excitement. Makero's patrol!

Slowly, the forest animals quieted and sat back to face the King with equal amounts of eagerness and apprehension. Soon, every eye was on Makero. Saderia's heart beat faster with mixed feelings of fear and excitement. Finally, she was going to know how the rest of the forest looked...At the same time, a dark sense of apprehension rose in her chest,

making her mind swirl with fear. Even as she longed to hear the news, part of her didn't want to know. What if the forest was damaged, torn apart, destroyed? What if it was beyond repair? What if her home was not the home she remembered?

She swallowed hard, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach. All she wanted was to have a happy homecoming, with her forest as proud and majestic as before, with homes for every animal waiting for them in the peaceful woods, with no more *problems* to deal with. Was that too much to ask? Feeling tense with unease, she tried to read her father's expression to see if she was about to receive good news or bad news. Her heart sank when she saw a dark shadow flit across Makero's face. Despite his confident façade, his green eyes were dark with apprehension and he seemed eerily reluctant to deliver the news.

A flash of despair shot through Saderia and she winced, then narrowed her eyes sternly. Determination lit up her amber eyes. No matter what state the forest was in, she would do whatever she could to get it back to its former glory. The kingdom would work together to fix any problems the hunters had left behind. They had been through too much to shy away from a bit of work in order to make their home great again.

Fire burned in Saderia's eyes. Whatever it took, she would help the forest in any way she could. If for nothing else, she would do it to make her mother proud.

Chapter Three

Rebuilding

Every eye rested on Makero. Tension hung in the air, as if the entire kingdom was holding its breath. With a fake air of confidence, Makero faced the forest animals and began to speak. “The patrol I sent out has returned with a report. Before I begin, I would like to remind all of you that expecting the forest to be perfect is a mistake. It will need some fixing up, but we can do it if we work together...” He took a deep breath, then gazed out at the animals with weary green eyes. “The hunters have left behind dangerous metal traps all over the forest. We have already gotten rid of some of the traps we found and I will send out another group of animals to search for more traps later. But until we get rid of them all, everyone should be extra careful when going through the woods.

“On to damages...” Makero hesitated, then took a deep breath and reluctantly continued. “Only a few places in the forest have avoided destruction entirely. Some places are worse than others. Some areas are in very bad shape, but no matter what has become of our homes, we should all remain strong so we can rebuild. No place is too badly damaged that it can’t be fixed. It will just take some work.” He paused to take a deep breath. In a softer, more somber voice, he continued his speech. “I will list the neighborhoods with the most damage first, starting with the Home of the Leopards.”

Dismay gleamed in the eyes of the leopards around the meeting place. Several of them exchanged nervous glances. Gathered together in one big group, the leopards all looked to one another for strength. Despite their unease, an air of determination hung over their group. Clearly, the idea of work didn’t scare them. Saderia’s eyes sought out Loki. The cheetah/leopard stood in between Lisa and the leopard leader, Maeta, gazing up at the King with glowing, determined green eyes. Lisa cast an uneasy glance at her friend, while Maeta stood firm, her expression resolute, as if she had expected no less.

Makero raised his voice as the leopards shifted nervously in the clearing. “If you recall, the hunters started out in the Home of the Leopards. The leopard homes are wrecked and mostly unlivable. In most cases, it would be best to tear them down and rebuild them from scratch. Until the houses are safe and rebuilt, the leopards will have to stay together in the few houses that are intact, or else stay in another neighborhood. I’m sure others would be willing to help the leopards and house them for the time being.

“Most houses in the Home of the Leopards have fallen trees lodged in their roofs. Other fallen trees lay all over the clearing. They will have to be removed. The stream that runs through the woods that surrounds the Home of the Leopards is dirty and polluted. The leopards will have to wait until it is properly cleaned before they can use it again.”

Yowls of disbelief erupted through the clearing when he finished speaking. All the leopards stared up at him with wide, dismayed eyes and let out cries of horror. When Maeta gave a sharp, warning flick of her tail, the spotted animals reluctantly lowered their voices and fell silent. Some of them let out low, frustrated hisses, but most of them forced themselves to take on an expression of strength and resolution, following Maeta’s example. Loki scowled and let out a hiss of her own, but didn’t say a word. Instead, she quickly composed herself, hiding her frustration behind a face of confidence. Saderia had to admire the leopards’ courage. She hoped the rest of the animals would be as optimistic.

Gravely, Makero described the other neighborhoods and the woods around them. Each was destroyed in different ways, but not beyond repair. Most of the houses were demolished, but some remained intact. Shops in towns were mostly wrecked, as well, but not all gone. Some rivers needed to be cleaned before they could be used again, but Saderia was sure they could fix it in time...Only time was the problem. Every second, she was running out of it. She wanted to help rebuild the forest and get it back to its once glorious state, but she also wanted to start looking for her mother. By the time the forest was repaired, her mother could be thousands of miles away. Or worse...

Gritting her teeth, Saderia shook the thoughts away and refused to let herself think that. Her mother was strong and she could survive, even in such a fragile state. Still, despite how much Saderia tried to convince

herself otherwise, Karenisha was in danger. Suddenly filled with a dark sense of urgency and desperation, Saderia longed to get out of the forest and look for her mother. Only she couldn't. Until the forest was repaired, she was stuck there. Until she could leave, her mother would have to cope on her own.

Dread and pain stabbed at her heart at the thought, but she forced herself to shake it off and be strong. The forest needed her to be strong. A hint of anger flitted through Saderia's mind as she struggled to maintain her brave façade. Why did Karenisha have to run away? If she had never left, Saderia could have returned to her old forest happily with her family. Instead, she had returned with only half a family, torn about what to do and terrified of what might happen to her mother. Still...it wasn't Karenisha's fault. It wasn't anyone's fault.

Pushing the thoughts out of her head, she sat back to listen to the rest of Makero's speech, trying to hide her impatience. When the King finished speaking, an anxious whispering spread through the crowd. The forest animals exchanged nervous glances and cast wary looks around the forest, but none of them voiced their doubts. Each of them seemed to put on a brave façade despite their fear. Trying to share their confidence, Saderia held her head high and put on a strong act. At the head of the clearing, Makero closed the meeting by urging the animals to return to their homes to begin the reconstruction. The King reminded them to be careful when traveling through the woods because of the hidden metal traps. To end the meeting, he emphasized that anyone could come to him at any time if they needed help, earning him a few grateful glances.

When he finished speaking, Makero leapt down from the tree and was once again swarmed by animals with questions. Biting back her impatience, Saderia sat back to wait for Makero to finish answering questions. After all, he had to put the forest first or else leaving Karenisha behind was all in vain. No matter how much she tried to ignore her restlessness, though, her tail still twitched impatiently back and forth. She wanted to see her home and find new houses for Dingo and Jeb as soon as possible, but until the forest animals' questions were answered, she was still stuck there...wasting time. An hour passed and she felt like she was going to explode. Beside her, Dash shifted impatiently on his paws. Jeb didn't seem to notice the long wait, too caught up with peering anxiously into the

forest, as if afraid of what was inside. Dingo sat calmly beside them, unbothered and unaffected by impatience or fear. After everything that had happened to him, not much affected him. Change and hard times were the norm.

After what felt like an eternity, the crowd of animals started to disperse, seeming satisfied with their answers. As the animals padded away, Makero emerged from the thick crowd and padded quickly toward Saderia. Saderia leapt to her paws instantly when he stopped in front of them, her tail swishing eagerly. Her eyes glowed with hope. "Can we...?"

"Yes, Saderia." Makero gave her a faint smile. "We can go see our house now."

Saderia's amber eyes lit up with hope and she instantly whipped around to face her friends. "Come on," she exclaimed, flicking her tail in excitement.

Dash immediately leapt to his paws and darted after her and Makero when they turned to lead the way. Behind them, Dingo and Jeb raced after them, struggling to keep up. Saderia practically flew over the wild grass as she raced in the direction of the dirt path that would take her home. Her mind couldn't work out the exact route that would get her there, but her paws seemed to know the way. Her heart soared as trees flew past her in a blur of crisp leaves and old trunks. Being back in the woods felt so *normal*.

"Watch your step!" Makero called, racing to keep up with her and nearly stumbling over the overgrown undergrowth. "Remember what I said about the hunter traps."

Saderia took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Walking more slowly, she eyed the wild grass carefully before putting her paw down to make sure there was no trap. Behind her, her friends did the same. Dingo grumbled under his breath every time a root tripped him up. More used to forests, Jeb darted through the woods easily, gazing around with mystified eyes. Whenever he saw something new, he let out a soft gasp. Oblivious to both of them, Dash walked happily through the woods, gazing around with glowing amber eyes.

After several minutes of walking, the five of them finally broke out of the woods and stumbled onto the familiar, worn-down dirt path. When Saderia saw the dirt road that led to her home, her eyes lit up with joy and she leapt into the air, letting out a whoop of excitement. Makero glanced up

as he walked past her, his green eyes glimmering and his face bright with a good-natured smile.

Dash raised an eyebrow at her and grinned. "Saderia?"

Saderia's face burned with embarrassment, but the smile wouldn't leave her face. "Sorry. I just missed this path so much."

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "It's just dirt."

Saderia grinned and giggled. "It's my dirt."

"It's, uh, pretty dirt," Jeb offered, giving her a curious glance.

Dingo snorted and laughed while Saderia just grinned good-naturedly. Shaking her head with a smile, she bounded eagerly down the dirt path with her father leading the way and her friends close behind her. Excitement glowed in her eyes and her smile shone brighter with every step she took toward her old home. When the dirt path finally reached an end and the five of them stepped out into the wild, grassy clearing housing Saderia's home, the smile slipped off her face. Taking its place was an expression twisted with shock. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth gaped open in sheer horror.

Fallen trees lay in pieces all around the clearing in front of her home. Several had crashed through the roof, destroying the stone walls that had once been strong and sturdy. Through the holes the fallen trees had left, she caught a glimpse of the inside of her home. Dirt and debris lay scattered across the walls and furniture. Strips of the ruined fabric of couches and beds and broken pieces of wood from the destroyed furniture littered the floor and clung to the sharp branches of the fallen trees. Cracks ran across the once perfect walls of her home, and parts of the wall seemed to have crumbled or been blown away by stray gunshots.

Saderia's heart sank with dismay. "This...this is horrible!"

Beside her, Dash let out a gasp of shock and gaped at the ruined house in horror. His eyes grew wide and gleamed with the same sense of disappointment and shock that haunted Saderia's face. Like her, he must have pictured the house in perfect condition, the way they had left it... forgetting the damage it might have endured.

A soft sigh sounded behind her. Makero stepped up beside her and rested his tail gently on her shoulder, a grim expression on his face. "It's okay," he murmured. "I know it looks bad, but we'll be able to fix it up eventually."

Though deep down she knew he was right, looking at the ruined house in front of her, Saderia almost couldn't believe it. She had always known the forest would be in bad shape, but she hadn't expected it to be *this* bad. Exactly how *long* would it take to repair the house? A horrible thought burned in the back of her mind. If the rest of the forest was wrecked as badly as her house, how long would it take to repair all of it? It was her job as Princess to oversee the forest repairs, but fixing the kingdom could take ages. And if it took such a long time, she would have to wait longer to start searching for Karenisha.

The color drained out of her face. There just wasn't enough time. Already, she was wasting time standing there when she should be out looking for Karenisha. What if something bad happened to her mother before she could start looking for her?

Seeing the dull, horrified look on her face, Dash laid his tail reassuringly on her shoulder. Hiding the dismayed look in his eyes, he squeezed up a weak, reassuring smile. "Makeró's right," he murmured. "We can get this place fixed if we work hard enough. It probably looks worse than it really is."

Beside him, Dingo gazed up at their home in awe, seeming not to notice the trees slicing through it or the crumbling walls. All he seemed to see was the sheer size of the den and how huge it was compared to the tiny rock dens he had grown up with. Shaking off his shock, he stepped closer to Saderia and Dash, a determined gleam lighting up his still stunned light brown eyes. "I'll help in any way I can."

"Me too," Jeb offered nervously, eyeing the house with a look of shock and trying to hide his doubts and unease at the thought of trying to help.

Hearing the uncertainty in his voice, Dingo glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "Don't worry, I'll help you. I doubt they'll make you lift trees by yourself anyway."

Jeb blinked in surprise, then managed a smile of relief. "Thanks."

Letting their words reassure her, Saderia took a deep breath and struggled to keep her thoughts straight and her fear at bay. Maybe Dash and Makeró were right. Even if it seemed impossible, in reality, fixing the house might not be so hard. She did have a decent crew of animals to help her. Her father was strong and resilient and could probably rebuild the house

once they removed the trees—after all, he had helped build Dash’s room when the dark lion had moved in with them. Though they might not look it at first, Dash and Dingo were both strong and didn’t give up easily, as well. Jeb might not be strong physically, but she was sure she could find something for him to do to speed up the process. Not a bad team.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine,” she muttered, trying to convince herself. “We… we’ll have to get started soon. But first, we’ll have to find places for Dingo and Jeb to live.” She took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts. It seemed like there were a million things she had to do and so little time to do them. “Okay…there are a few houses that are just beyond the woods outside my house.” She glanced at the dirt path and flicked her tail toward the woods to the left of the road. “The woods go on for a few miles before you can see the houses. Those houses would be good places for you two to live since they’re close to our house. We should check them out and hope no trees have destroyed them.”

“If you promise to be careful, then you can go by yourselves,” Makero spoke up, giving her a stern look. “I was thinking of going to town to see what kind of supplies I can find to fix this place up. After that, I thought I might join Cia and Jash. Before the meeting started, I asked them to show Jeb’s parents around the forest. That’s what they’re doing now. I might catch up to them later, though, to help show Telku and Jati around.”

“Okay, that would be fine.” Saderia gave him a warm smile. “We’ll be careful.”

Makero smiled and nodded. “Good. I hope you find good places for your friends to live, places that are still intact. Or at least easy to work on.”

Saderia let out a soft sigh. “Me too.” Pushing back her doubts, she turned to her friends and flicked her tail to signal for them to follow. The three of them fell into step behind her as she led them back toward the dirt path. Trying to put on a strong façade, she led them across the path and dove into the woods on the left side of the road with a soft rustle of leaves. The woods opened up before her, a familiar, peaceful land dotted with leafy trees and blooming bushes. The scent of earth and fresh growth drifted through the air.

Keeping her eyes open for any of the hunters’ metal traps, Saderia crept across the soft grass and slunk through the dense woods, breathing in the warm air and listening to the rustling of the leaves overhead. Her friends

followed close behind, Jeb gazing around in awe, Dingo muttering and tripping over weeds, and Dash snickering at both of them. After several minutes of walking, the trees started to thin out and the four of them stepped out of the woods. A small clearing framed by dense woods and covered by a thick, overhanging canopy opened up before them. Four small, rocky houses sat along the back of the clearing. One was destroyed by a fallen tree, but three of the tiny homes were still intact. A faint, worn-down dirt path speckled with sparse grass led across the clearing and ran in front of the four homes like a rough sidewalk. Several fallen trees lay scattered across the clearing, just barely having missed hitting the three undamaged houses.

Saderia let out the breath she had been holding, relieved to have found a few houses still intact. Smiling faintly to herself, she cast a glance at Dingo and Jeb as they stepped into the tiny clearing behind her. “Look okay so far?”

Dingo shrugged apathetically. “Sure. I really don’t care where I stay, though, as long as I have a floor to sleep on.”

“You won’t have to sleep on rock floors anymore—you’ll have a bed and a blanket,” Saderia offered, giving him a warm smile.

Dingo flicked his tail indifferently. “Don’t know what that is and don’t care.”

Jeb frowned nervously. “I won’t have to sleep on rocky floors either, right?”

“No,” Saderia assured him, giving him a kind smile. “The forest has more modern stuff than your old forest, including a comfortable place to sleep. I’ll show you.”

Flicking her tail, she signaled for her friends to follow her and led them toward the first house, the smallest of the three left intact. A door carved into the rocky front wall opened up into a tiny stone living room furnished with just one couch and a few frayed rugs. Dirt covered the floor and the furniture looked worn-out and disheveled after being left uncared-for for so long. The couch would probably have to be replaced. The living room seemed too small for any other furniture, but the den seemed a good fit for Dingo, who cared little for furniture. Two doors on the left wall of the living room led into a tiny bedroom with one bare, colorless bed and a bathroom with just the basics.

Saderia flicked her tail as her friends gazed at the house. “What do you think?”

Dingo shrugged. “If Jeb doesn’t want it, I’ll take it.”

“There’s only one bedroom, so it would be too cramped for Jeb. His parents are going to live there with him, after all,” Saderia replied, gazing thoughtfully at the house. “There’s probably more room for them in the next two houses. Want to take a look, Jeb?”

Jeb nodded and managed a faint smile. “Sure.”

The four of them moved toward the next house, a den slightly bigger than the first. Past the wooden front door was a decent-sized living room with a few frayed couches. At the back of the room was a small kitchen with several chipped counters and a tiny, dirty table. A narrow hallway on the left led to a small bedroom with a tiny, unkempt bed. On the right was another hallway that led to a bathroom and a wider bedroom with a bare double bed. Though small compared to her own mansion, it seemed big enough to house Jeb’s family.

“I like this den. I think I’ll take it,” Jeb exclaimed, gazing around at the house with shining blue and green eyes. The kraguer paused, then glanced nervously up at Dingo, flattening his ears in unease. “Unless you want it...”

Dingo shrugged carelessly. “If you want it, it’s yours.”

Jeb frowned uncertainly. “Okay...But the other one is kind of small...”

Dingo snorted. “I used to share a den much smaller than that with four siblings. I think I’ll manage.”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then managed a hesitant smile. “Okay, I’ll take it then.”

Saderia smiled faintly. “So now you both have places to live. I’ll tell my Dad, Jeb, and he’ll tell your parents about it. Do you think they’ll like the house you picked?”

Jeb shrugged and nodded. “Probably.”

She let out a soft sigh of relief. “Good. Well, that didn’t take too long. We need to get back to my house, though, to start working on it. Will you two...?”

“We’ll come,” Dingo replied firmly, while Jeb nodded in agreement.

A smile crept across her face. "Thanks, guys." When her friends merely smiled in response, she took a deep breath, then turned and bounded back toward the woods to go back to her home. Her friends fell into step behind her and followed her when she pushed past the dense undergrowth lining the edge of the clearing.

"I hope Makero found some good supplies," Dash murmured, weaving absently through the thick trees dotting the overgrown woods. "Do you have any idea what we could do to get those trees out of the house?"

Saderia shrugged. "I have one idea. But we'll see what kinds of supplies Dad has before we decide what to do."

"Okay." Dash hesitated, then studied her closely as they moved through the wild, dense woods. "Are you okay? I mean..."

"I'm fine," she muttered, cutting him off and avoiding his eyes. "I know what you mean. I...I just have to hope that my Mom will be fine. I really want to look for her, though, even though I know I have to look after the forest first."

"Me too." Dash heaved a weary sigh and glanced at his paws as he stepped around a thick clump of undergrowth. "I want to find her as soon as possible. I hope we can fix the forest quickly, so we can start looking soon."

"Yeah..." Saderia trailed off, a grave shadow flitting across her face. Narrowing her eyes, she hesitated, then glanced curiously back at Dingo. "You'll lead us through the desert when we go looking for my Mom, right?"

Dingo shrugged and nodded absently, pulling weeds off his paw. "Of course."

Saderia smiled faintly, then looked hopefully down at her kraguer friend, her eyes clouding with unease. "Jeb? Will you come with us, too?"

Jeb shivered nervously and glanced uncomfortably down at his paws, but managed a weak nod. "I guess I'll come."

"Thanks." Saderia let out a long, relieved sigh. "So are you two a little more comfortable being here now that you've seen some of the forest and chosen your homes?"

"I guess," Dingo sighed, pausing to tug a thorn out of his paw and rolling his eyes.

Jeb flicked his tail uncertainly, but tried to smile. "I'm fine...It's all right, I guess. But I don't exactly know where we are..."

“You’ll get used to it,” Dash assured him, giving him a kind flick of his tail. “Eventually you’ll learn your way around the forest.”

“If you say so,” Dingo growled, curling his lip and glancing anxiously around at the dense woods. An uncomfortable, almost claustrophobic expression haunted his face. All the trees towering over his head seemed to make him feel extremely out of place. The thick, rustling canopy of leaves blocked out the sun and the wide, open sky, two things Dingo had grown used to seeing in the desert. Feeling a flash of sympathy for the canine, Saderia moved faster and tried to avoid thick patches of undergrowth. Hopefully, being back in the clearing where they could at least see the sky would make him feel more at ease.

Dingo narrowed his eyes as they bounded through the thick woods, his fur bristling and his tail flicking anxiously back and forth. “Is it always this cold here?”

Saderia shook her head reassuringly and tried to smile. “Not always. Most days, it’s pleasantly warm actually. To us, at least. You’ll get used to it eventually.” At least, she hoped so. After growing up in the dry heat of the desert, anything less than a hundred degrees probably felt cold to him. Hopefully, he would soon adjust to the chilliness...

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she tried not to worry too much and instead focused on how she was going to fix her house. Soon the trees opened up into the wide clearing in front of her disheveled home, making her wince at the sight of it. With her three friends close behind her, she padded out into the center of the grassy clearing and looked around to find her father. A second later, Makero appeared on the edge of the dirt path, carrying a rough, frayed bag filled with tools, rope, and several other supplies. The King grinned when he spotted them and darted into the clearing, skidding to a halt just a few paces in front of them.

“Well, these are all the supplies I could scrounge up.” Makero dropped the huge bag onto the sparse grass with a soft thud and the sharp clatter of metal tools. “Hopefully, they’ll be enough to help us fix the house.”

“I’m sure we’ll make do,” Dash replied, scanning the equipment and trying to sound optimistic despite the doubt in his eyes.

Dingo and Jeb stared at the tools in bewilderment. A mystified gleam lit up Jeb’s blue/green eyes, while Dingo wore his typical skeptical

expression.

The desert dog raised an eyebrow. "I don't know what half that stuff is, but I suppose we could use them. Even if I can't figure those 'tools' out, I'll help somehow."

Jeb winced and shrank back, his eyes clouding with guilt. "I don't know what those things are either, but even if I did, I don't think I could help. I'm too weak."

Saderia rested her tail gently on his shoulder, reading the misery on his face and knowing it bothered him to have to lean on his friends all the time. Her eyes narrowed with sympathy. "Don't worry, Jeb. I'm sure we'll think of something for you to do."

Jeb tried to smile back, but his eyes still shone with doubt. Offering him an encouraging smile, Saderia turned to face her home, knowing all of her friends would have *some* job to do once they began. Now...how to go about repairing the house...

Her eyes scanned the dead trees lodged firmly in the roof and walls, then darted to the bag full of tools laying at Makero's feet. How could she get the fallen trees out of the roof? Her mind whirled as she struggled to find a solution. The same desperate, bewildered look that haunted her face clouded her friends' eyes as they asked themselves the same question. Doubt shone in Saderia's eyes, but she forced herself to keep thinking. If her mother had been there, she wouldn't have wanted her to just give up without even trying to find a solution. Saderia would have wanted to make her proud...

A vague idea suddenly glimmered in the back of her mind, making her eyes light up with hope. Before she could think, she opened her mouth and blurted out, "Suppose we..."

Immediately, four pairs of eyes flashed to her face, watching her expectantly. Saderia blinked in surprise, then took a deep breath, resisting the urge to avert her eyes and stare at the ground. This time, she couldn't give in to her fears. Never again would that happen.

Assuming a fake air of confidence, she faced her friends and her father with gleaming amber eyes. "Suppose we take those ropes, tie them around the trees, then pull on the ropes to lift the trees up out of the house and let them fall somewhere else."

The four animals glanced thoughtfully at the ropes. The thick strands seemed long and strong enough for the job. With the combined strength of Saderia, Makero, Dash, and Dingo, they might just be able to do it, assuming the rope was strong enough not to snap.

“I’m assuming ‘ropes’ are those long things that look like vines,” Dingo spoke up, flicking his tail coolly toward the ropes. When Saderia nodded, he shrugged. “Sounds like a decent plan. I’m in. Though I don’t exactly excel in the strength department.”

Saderia shrugged carelessly. “That’s okay. You’ll still be a great help.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Dash said, giving her a warm, brilliant smile.

A faint blush crept across her face. Abruptly, she turned to look at Makero, feeling embarrassed by the warmth in his gaze.

Makero nodded slowly, a smile creeping across his face. “I agree with Dash.”

Saderia smiled, then glanced at Jeb, her eyes worried. “Jeb? What do you think?”

Jeb gazed sullenly down at his paws, a dark, miserable shadow flitting across his face. “I could try to help, if you want...but I’ll probably just get in the way.”

Saderia sighed regretfully, sensing his pain. Narrowing her eyes in thought, she studied the house, trying to think of something Jeb could do to feel useful. She couldn’t exactly picture him being much help with lifting a tree, but the second she glanced at the house, an idea popped into her head. A warm, eager smile lit up her face. “I know what you can do. You can go into the house and find the tree we’re going to lift. Once we throw the ropes around it, you can tie the ends together. That way, we won’t have to keep going back and forth in and out of the house tying ropes. Plus, in order to get to the ropes to tie them, you might have to squeeze into small places. You would be perfect for that job.”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then looked up at her with wide, hopeful eyes. “Really?”

“Yes, you’d be a big help,” she replied, giving him a warm smile.

“You would definitely have the bravest job,” Dingo remarked, his light brown eyes trained on the house and his expression cool and

indifferent.

Jeb jumped at his kind words, since the scarred desert dog still seemed to frighten him. Blinking rapidly, he gazed at Dingo in surprise, then managed a small, grateful smile. “O-Okay, I’ll do it. But...those trees won’t fall on me, right?”

“No way,” Dash said, flicking him reassuringly with his tail. “We won’t let them.”

Jeb hesitated uncertainly, then squeezed up a grateful smile and nodded. A hint of nervousness still haunted his blue and green eyes, as if he was afraid of making a mistake, but he seemed happy to have some way to help.

Feeling a hint of pride, Saderia grinned, then padded toward the house, signaling for her friends to follow. A dead tree had crashed right into the center of her home just inches away from the door, cutting deep into the front room. Saderia, Dash, Dingo, and Makero surrounded the uprooted end of the tree resting against the ground. After a moment of hesitation, Jeb pushed through the door into the ruined house. Instantly, an awed gasp sounded from somewhere inside the house, bringing a faint smile to Saderia’s face. Clearly, the furniture in her home, even when damaged beyond repair, had amazed the kraguer. The thought made her heart ache with a sudden longing to see the inside of her house, but she shook it off. She couldn’t afford to waste any time. Fix the house first, explore it later. The clock was ticking and her mother’s own hourglass could be running out at that very moment. Getting the repairs done as quickly as possible was paramount.

Letting out a long, calming sigh, she grabbed one of the ropes and leapt onto the tree. Being careful to place her paws gently on the rough trunk and to avoid the rotted, unstable areas, she crept up the slight incline of the fallen tree. The bark groaned, creaked, and shifted under her paws, but she ignored it. All she could do was trust the cracked wall holding the tree in place and hope for the best. When she stood halfway up the fallen tree over a gaping hole peering into her living room, she stopped and leaned down. “Jeb? You there?” Through the myriad of tree branches jutting out at all angles, she could just barely make out the dirt-covered floor of her living room. When a bright yellow face appeared beneath the tree, she clearly recognized Jeb for his vibrant color.

Jeb looked up nervously, his blue and green eyes still stunned and glazed with shock at the sight of her home's interior. "I-I'm here," he stammered.

"Okay," Saderia called, dropping the rope and draping it carefully over the thick trunk so that both ends dangled down toward Jeb. "Grab the rope and tie it tightly around the tree. But be careful. Don't stand directly beneath the tree. Can you reach it?"

"Yeah, I think so." The tiny creature paused, then leapt up and grabbed the two dangling pieces of rope. A small thud sounded inside the den when he crashed clumsily back to the floor. The rope shifted against the trunk as Jeb tied the ends together. A second later, it stopped moving and Jeb's voice floated up to her. "Okay, I think I got it!"

"Okay, good job!" Saderia's eyes lit up with pride. "You only have to do it three more times and then just step back and let the rest of us pull the tree out."

When Jeb shakily agreed, Saderia looked back at the end of the tree where her father, Dash, and Dingo stood. At a nod from her, Dingo grabbed a rope from the supply bag and hurled it to her. In one quick movement, she nabbed it out of the air and slung it over the tree. While Jeb worked to tie the ends of the rope together, Dash threw her a new rope. As soon as Jeb finished tying, she laid the third rope over the tree. The tiny creature quickly tied that rope and then the next one when Saderia caught the final rope thrown by Makero and draped it over the tree. Soon, all of the ropes had been tied.

With a pleased smile, Saderia trailed lightly back down the tree and leapt to the ground. The instant her paws touched the earth, Dash raced over to her and started checking her over, his eyes bright with worry and his voice thick with concern. "You're okay, right?"

Despite her urgency to fix the house and get moving, Saderia couldn't help but laugh while Dash frantically checked her over, his eyes wide with fear. From the terror shining in his eyes, he looked like he thought she had almost been killed. Snickering, she clamped a paw over his muzzle and pushed him away. "I'm fine. I just walked on a tree," she laughed, her light voice revealing her amusement.

Dash's face grew hot with embarrassment and he quickly looked down to study his paws. "I know, but...I just...wanted to make sure."

She snorted. “If you freak out when I walk on fallen trees, how did you ever survive when I climbed still-standing ones?”

Dash flicked his tail in embarrassment. “Sorry. I guess I just worry too much now, after all that’s happened...”

“Obviously,” she replied, trying to hide a giggle. Her ears pricked up when she heard a snort behind her and the soft, amused sound of snickering.

Chuckling to himself and shaking his head, Dingo stepped up behind them and laid a paw mockingly on Dash’s shoulder, giving him a wide sneer. “Just so you know, lovebirds don’t get out of doing the work.”

Dash glared at him. “What are you talking about?”

Dingo just laughed and turned to walk back toward the tree, snickering to himself the whole way. Dash gaped at him in disbelief as he sauntered away, but Saderia just grinned. Seeing the stunned expression on Dash’s face, she burst out laughing with true amusement, the first she had felt in a long time. When Dash whipped around to face her in disbelief, she just laughed and shrugged. “Hey, at least we put Dingo in a good mood.”

Dash flattened his ears and lashed his tail. “Yeah, at *our* expense!”

She snickered and grinned. “Yeah, well, it’s Dingo. What can I say?”

Dash rolled his eyes, but couldn’t stop himself from smiling despite how he tried to hide it. Soon, he was grinning as widely as Saderia and chuckling under his breath, even as they faced the difficult task of removing the tree.

A bright smile lit up Saderia’s face and her eyes twinkled in the bright light piercing through the canopy. Despite everything, she was a lot luckier than she thought.

Chapter Four

Nightmares

A heavy sigh breathed out of Saderia's chest. Wincing, she lowered herself gingerly onto the cool grass and let out a soft breath of relief. Every muscle in her body burned with pain and her legs felt sore and weak. Her whole body ached with exhaustion. Even breathing hurt. Saderia rolled her eyes. When she had first had her 'brilliant idea,' she hadn't realized just how difficult lifting one tree would be, much less *several* trees.

Once the ropes had been secured around the tree, she, her friends, and Makero had each grabbed a rope, and on a cue, had given a strong tug. The only thing that had moved was them. All of them had ended up sprawled face-first in the dirt, while the tree hadn't budged at all. None of them had been quick to give up, though. Eventually, after several unsuccessful tries, they had pulled the tree out of the roof. Once they lifted the tree, they had swiveled it around to let it fall harmlessly off to the side. With one tree gone, they had had to repeat the process for all the other trees lodged in the roof. What fun.

Halfway through, Saderia's muscles had started to ache so badly she could barely walk, but she didn't complain. The work had to be done. Dash had muttered complaints under his breath, but faithfully helped her work and checked on her constantly. Makero had hissed under his breath every now and then, but hadn't complained and had focused solely on working, hiding his worry. Dingo hadn't said a word of complaint the entire time and had endured the arduous task in silence. If a tiny thorn happened to prick his paw after the work, though, he was more than happy to let everyone know.

Once all was said and done, Saderia could barely move. Somehow, though, they had managed to remove all the trees by the end of the day. How, she would never know.

Tired and aching with pain, Saderia heaved a sigh and settled down on the wild grass on the outskirts of the clearing housing her dilapidated

home. Shadowed trees rose up all around her, framing the black night sky with dark, leafy branches. Silver moonlight shone down through the thin canopy, lighting up the dark, overgrown grass and dappling her orange fur. No crickets chirped in the stillness of the night and no woods animals rustled the undergrowth. Tense silence haunted the wide clearing.

Sure that the inside of the house would be less than welcoming, Saderia and her friends and family had decided to camp outside for the night. Cia and Uncle Jash had returned with Jeb's parents a few hours ago. When they arrived, Jeb had told his parents everything that had happened and described the house he had picked out. Though still shaky and uneasy, Telku and Jati had seemed to accept it. The nervous kraguers had decided to camp out with them, as well. The two of them lay close beside Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash, talking quietly. All the adults were smiling, and Telku and Jati seemed a lot more at ease among the others.

Dash lay close beside Saderia, gazing up at the glowing silver moon and stars with tired amber eyes. Dingo and Jeb lay in the grass on either side of her and Dash, gazing out at the woods with weary eyes. Smiling faintly, Saderia wrapped her tail around Dash's and gazed around at her forest with shimmering amber irises. "It's so good to be back," she whispered.

Dash grinned, his amber eyes gleaming with joy. "I know. I missed it so much."

"To feel the grass again, walk through all the places I remember, see the trees rising up in the woods..." Saderia trailed off and let out a soft sigh. "It's amazing."

"Trees are overrated," Dingo chuckled, giving them a playful grin.

Saderia just shrugged and smiled. "Maybe, but I love them all the same."

Jeb's eyes darted wildly back and forth, scanning the darkened undergrowth behind him and the shadowy clearing around him. Every rustle in the woods seemed to make him jump. His blue/green eyes glowed with equal amounts of fear and amazement. "I...I guess this place isn't *that* different. It's really pretty..."

"Thanks." Saderia smiled, then narrowed her eyes in concern. "Are you going to be able to sleep well tonight? I promise, there's nothing out there that will hurt you."

Jeb took a deep breath and tried to relax. "All right. I'll be fine..."

Saderia smiled and gave him an encouraging flick of her tail before turning around to gaze out at the grassy clearing alight with a milky, silver glow. Her amber eyes shone with pride and excitement as she stared out at her home, and her heart glowed with a sense of triumph and relief. Finally, she had returned home and fulfilled the wish she had hoped would come true since the day she had left. Finally, she was back where she belonged.

A sigh suddenly broke through her thoughts. Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up to see Dingo lying close beside her, gazing up at the starry sky with shadowed eyes. His brown irises glimmered with pain and regret despite the emotionless mask he wore to hide it. A wistful expression haunted his face. With a flash of sympathy, Saderia realized what he was thinking. Letting out a sigh, she rested her tail on his scruffy back. "Dingo?"

Dingo blinked out of his thoughts and instantly jerked around to face her, his eyes dazed and clouded. "Huh?" His voice cracked and he quickly cleared his throat, abruptly looking away. "I mean, what?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then let out a sympathetic sigh. "Dingo, don't worry about leaving Claw behind by living here. She wouldn't just watch over you in the desert. She's watching you here, too. Even though you've left the desert, you haven't lost her."

Dingo's eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in shock. Saderia's eyes clouded and she anxiously shuffled her paws, hoping she hadn't disturbed him by reading his thoughts. Sometimes she forgot it wasn't normal to know what others were thinking.

Taking a deep breath, she lowered her voice to a soft, careful whisper. "I want to try to visit her tonight in my Dreams. Is that okay?"

Dingo stared at her with wide, stunned eyes for a long, tense moment. After what felt like ages, he shook himself and stumbled clumsily to his paws. Shakily, he gave her a weak nod, then sharply looked away. "I...I'm going to go over there..." he stammered, gesturing to a spot several paces away. "It's, uh, too prickly in this spot..." His voice cracked and he quickly turned to walk away. His head drooped and he avoided her gaze, but when Saderia caught a glimpse of his face, she saw a tiny smile of relief.

Dash rested his paw gently over hers and gave her a kind smile and a nod.

Jeb looked up quickly and peered over Dash's dark shoulder, his blue/green eyes wide with concern. "Is he going to be all right?"

Saderia smiled faintly. "He'll be fine." Giving Jeb a reassuring glance, she gazed around at the starlit forest, then laid her head down on her paws, letting out a sigh. Her eyelids fluttered shut and she smiled when she felt Dash wrap his tail lightly around hers.

"Goodnight, Saderia," the dark lion murmured, his mane brushing against her shoulder.

A glow of happiness burned in Saderia's heart as she drifted into sleep. If only her mother could see her and her friends now, so close and so determined to help each other.

A strange, sleepy scene greeted Saderia the second her eyes fluttered open. Instead of the grassy clearing where she had fallen asleep, she found herself gazing out at a sea of sand. Dunes spread out for miles all around her, meeting the starless blue sky far on the horizon. An ethereal blue glow lit up the dreamy desert. A sense of hope and new urgency filled Saderia's heart when she realized where she was. Sensing a strange, ghostly presence behind her, she whipped around on the wide dune she was standing on and found herself staring at the very animal she had been hoping to see.

Dingo's ghostly sister, Claw, stood across from her on the sandy dune, her light brown fur as long and unruly as her brother's. The pink ribbon tied around her neck was almost lost in her fluffy fur. The spirit's light brown eyes shone through the hazy blue glow of the spirit world. As Saderia looked up at her, the ghost met her gaze with a soft, serious expression. Hope filled Saderia's heart at the sight of her. Any other animal might be afraid to see a ghost, but after speaking to Claw so many times before, she had grown used to seeing the spirit. Besides, ghosts might be the only ones who could help her.

Seeing the spirit's grave expression, Saderia was almost afraid to meet Claw's light brown eyes, terrified of what she might see in them. Would it be grief? Sadness? Pity? When she cast a glance at the spirit out of the corner of her eye, Saderia heaved a long, weary sigh when she saw the carefully guarded expression on her face. Claw was almost as much of an

expert at hiding her feelings as her brother. Her light brown eyes betrayed nothing but kindness, if not an eerie sense of seriousness.

Saderia took a deep breath and met Claw's gaze with pleading amber eyes. "Claw...Please. You've got to help me. Please tell me my Mom's okay, if you know."

Claw let out a heavy sigh and darkly studied her paws. For several tense moments, the ghost remained silent, gazing at the ground with narrowed eyes. After what felt like forever, she slowly looked up and tiredly met her gaze. "Your mother is fine. For now."

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm. "What do you mean by that? Is she in danger? Do I need to leave right now to find her?"

Claw let out a weary sigh and closed her eyes. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, what do you mean?" Saderia demanded, her heart starting to pound.

Claw took a deep breath and placed a feathery paw on Saderia's shoulder, a light touch she could just barely feel. "Saderia..." She hesitated and frowned uncertainly, as if considering what to say. After a long moment, she let out a reluctant sigh. "Saderia, your mother is not hurt in any way right now, but...she is in a...difficult situation."

Saderia's ears flattened with fear. "What kind of situation? Is she hurt? Is she *going* to be hurt? Please, Claw, you have to tell me more."

Claw bit her lip and looked around helplessly, as if searching for words or stalling for time. Watching her eyes flit nervously from side to side, Saderia took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Screaming at her spirit guide wasn't going to help. Heaving a sigh, she firmly met Claw's nervous gaze and spoke in a voice as calm and steady as possible. "If your brother was in this 'situation,' would you want me to tell *you* about it?"

Claw heaved a weary sigh and gazed at her paws with tired light brown eyes. Regret glimmered in her shadowed irises. "I'm sure I would..." The spirit paused, then met her eyes with a stern, unflinching gaze. "But sometimes what we want is not what we need."

"Then tell me what I need to know," Saderia replied, her expression softening. "I'm sorry, Claw, but I miss my mother. I'm just barely managing to keep myself together to help the forest. Just tell me my Mom's not hurt now and not *going* to be hurt."

Claw took a deep breath and let it out slowly, avoiding her eyes. “Let’s put it this way. Your mother is not helpless. Despite what she has gone through, the strength of her character remains the same even if she doesn’t know it. Even if she *is* hurt, she’ll recover. She’ll push herself to survive. Isn’t that what she did when she was locked in Dastarius’s dungeon? She believed you were dead then, but she still kept herself alive and she’ll do it again.” Claw paused, then heaved a weary sigh. “Your mother is in a difficult situation somewhat similar to the one your father was in. I can’t guarantee that no harm will ever come to her, but I can tell you that it won’t be unbearable.”

Saderia nodded slowly, letting everything Claw had told her sink in and trying to control the fearful pounding of her heart. The thought of her mother suffering any kind of pain made her feel sick, but Claw did have a point. After seeing the horrible state her mother had been in before she left, Saderia had thought her brave spirit had been destroyed, but her mother had probably felt the same way in Dastarius’s dungeon so many years ago. If she could survive then, she could survive now. Somewhere inside her, Karenisha’s resilient spirit still burned and would help her survive.

Saderia sighed. “All right, I understand. But can you just promise me she’ll live?”

Claw said nothing.

Saderia felt her heart skip a beat at the spirit’s silence. A dark sense of dread rose in her chest, making her feel unusually cold. “Claw...? Can you promise me she’ll live?”

Claw bit her lip and looked away. “Nothing in life is that simple, Saderia. I cannot see the future and even though you can, the future can change in the blink of an eye. I can’t guarantee anything. *But* there is an excellent chance she’ll live,” Claw added, seeing the horror on her face and giving her a stern look. “I *would* promise you that she will survive, but I don’t want to get your hopes up too high just in case.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Just in case what?”

An ominous shadow crossed Claw’s face. “In case the price of her life is too high.”

Saderia’s eyes widened and her heart skipped with alarm. Her mind whirled with confusion. What did she mean by that? Why would there be a price on her mother’s life anyway? Shaking off her thoughts, she narrowed

her eyes in determination and firmly met Claw's gaze. "I don't care what the price is. I'll do anything to save my mother."

Claw heaved a weary sigh. "Yes, that's what worries me."

Saderia's fur bristled with fury. "Are you suggesting I let my mother *die*?"

"Of course not!" Claw's eyes widened in dismay. "I would never suggest such a thing! I just want you to remember that you should think things through and be careful."

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing her fur to lie flat and trying to calm herself down. Her fur prickled with shame at yelling at her spirit guide and she gazed guiltily down at her paws, embarrassed by her outburst. Claw was a kind, gentle animal and always had her best interests at heart. She should have known she would never suggest something like that. Heaving a sigh, she weakly looked up and met Claw's gaze. "If that's all you can tell me, then thank you. I'll be on my guard." She paused. "But can you please tell me when I should leave to find my mother?"

Claw managed a weak smile. "You'll know when the time is right. Make sure your forest is in good shape before you do anything, or at least on its way. Strength could become a virtue in the near future and a forest that's still partially destroyed won't help."

She nodded meekly. "I will...But Claw, do you *know* what's going to happen?"

Claw let out a tiny laugh, her eyes gleaming with a hint of playfulness. "Saderia, I haven't a clue as to what's going to happen. Sometimes all you need is a feeling that *something* is wrong to get you as worried as I am." She lightly flicked her tail and sighed. "I should go now, but I promise I'll clue you in as to what's going on once I know more. And I'll watch over your mother all the time. I'll tell you if anything's wrong."

A grateful smile crossed Saderia's face. "Promise?"

"Promise," Claw replied, giving her a warm, sincere nod.

Saderia nodded back, her eyes shining with hope and gratitude. Relief at finally having spoken to Claw glowed on her face. Despite Claw's vague answers, she felt better knowing the spirit would look after her mother and help her however she could. "Thank you," she murmured, dipping her head to Claw as the spirit began to fade.

Claw gave her a warm smile and flicked her tail in farewell. “Goodbye, Saderia.”

A second later, the spirit vanished and the ghostly desert disappeared in a swirl of darkness, leaving Saderia alone in a black void of unconsciousness.

Blackness surrounded Saderia on all sides. An eerie, uncomfortable feeling crept over her, raising all the fur along her back. Out of nowhere, a low, cool voice whispered through the darkness. “I’ve been waiting a very long time to speak to you again.”

Alarm shot through Saderia like a bolt of electricity. Instantly, she whipped around to see who had spoken, but before she could see anything, a sudden flash of blinding white light sliced through the blackness. When the light faded, she found herself in a new place entirely. Hazy brown sand dunes spread out in front of her for miles immeasurable. She stood on a rough, rocky platform towering over the desert. Leagues of dingoes spread out below her, gazing up at her with cruel, sadistic smiles. All she could see of the rocky formation was the sharp edge hanging over open air in front of her. When she looked down at the rocky platform and saw her paws, her fur wasn’t orange but dark brown. A loud, bloodthirsty howl suddenly erupted close by, making her look up sharply in alarm. Beside her, a hazy figure with long, dusty dark brown fur stood overlooking the desert, a cruel sneer on his face.

“Soon we will rule *everything!*”

A dark feeling of hunger stirred inside Saderia as the figure’s cold words rang out through the desert. Seconds later, the scene flickered into darkness and changed. Haziness blurred her vision. Fuzzy darkness covered the scene that appeared before her and the strange, shadowed area reeked with the scent of despair. A gaunt, blurry figure covered in wounds sat hunched over in a corner, keeping her head down. Shivers raced down the animal’s spine and her soft voice breathed into the darkness. “Saderia...”

The familiar voice made all the fur on Saderia’s back stand up in alarm. “Mom!” With a shout of desperation, she tried to race toward the figure, but the scene vanished before her eyes.

Before her vision could adjust to the new scene that opened up before her, her paws were swept out from underneath her. With a sharp cry,

she crashed to the gritty ground. Pain burned through her body. Her vision blurred, making it impossible to see anything but vague, hazy figures surrounding her. Claws lashed out at her and tore at her fur from all sides. A desperate scream escaped her throat as the strange figures moved in on her, tearing at her with claws and snarling. Almost as soon as they had descended on her, though, they backed away and stopped. A low growl sounded somewhere in the distance, saying words she couldn't make out. Even without understanding the words, though, the voice made a fierce rage burn in the pit of her stomach. Her claws dug furiously into the ground even as hopelessness swept over her.

The scene flickered before her eyes and faded away. A new, hazy scene came to life before her, too dark and blurred for her to make out anything but the dark silhouettes of earth and sky. Suddenly, a dark figure appeared on the horizon, bounding toward her quickly. Hope rose in Saderia's chest at the sight of the figure, but almost instantly, her hopes shattered. A fierce sense of pain and betrayal washed over her so strongly it nearly knocked her off her paws. The scene shattered just as the dark figure leapt toward her.

Left with a cold feeling of emptiness and treachery, Saderia found herself surrounded by darkness. Somewhere in the blackness surrounding her, a dark voice breathed an icy command.

“Kill her.”

Saderia's eyes flew open and she jolted awake with a gasp, her heart pounding wildly. Blinking rapidly, she gazed around with wide amber eyes, her chest heaving with shaky pants. Slowly, the overgrown, sunlit clearing in front of her house swam into view, making her eyes widen with bewilderment. Seconds later, a dark brown face appeared in front of her, making her jump up with a sharp cry of alarm.

“Saderia?” Dash frowned in confusion. “Are you okay?”

“I...” Saderia let out a shaky gasp and struggled to find the words to speak. “I...” Her voice trailed off and her amber eyes clouded in confusion as she took in the scene around her. Morning sunlight filtered in through the lush canopy of leaves overhead, illuminating soft patches of grass and fallen leaves. To her right was the familiar dirt path, and in front of her sat her dilapidated house. Her friends lay all around her, close enough for her to

sense their presence. A calm, peaceful silence covered the sleepy clearing, broken only by the soft rustling of leaves.

A shaky sigh of relief breathed out of her throat. She was home. But...what exactly had she seen in that Dream? The eerie scenes from her strange, clairvoyant nightmare swirled through her mind, sending a shiver down her spine. What did it all mean?

“Saderia?” Dash frowned at the stricken look on her face and narrowed his eyes, their amber depths gleaming with worry. “Did you have a Dream?”

Saderia looked up sharply and took a deep, shaky breath, trying to push away her fear. Seeing Dash’s kind gaze, she tried to relax, knowing the sight of her best friend should calm her down. Instead, she found herself looking away, unable to meet his gaze. A cold shiver raced down her spine. Blinking in surprise, she shook it off and turned back to him, deciding it must just be nerves.

Dash rested his tail anxiously on her shoulder. “You look really scared...Was it bad?”

Saderia took a deep breath. “Sort of...I don’t know. Dreams always confuse me.”

Dash’s eyes narrowed with worry. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She opened her mouth to speak, then paused when something caught her eye. Turning, she spotted Makero, Cia, Uncle Jash, and Jeb’s parents standing close to the cracked front door of the house, talking and shaking off exhaustion. Despite the confident tone of the King’s voice, Saderia could tell he was in pain. Behind his fake tone was a note of sorrow and regret. Devastation darkened his normally bright green eyes even though he tried to hide it. Clearly, Karenisha’s absence still weighed heavily on his mind.

Saderia took a deep breath and looked back at Dash, trying to get her thoughts together. “I’d love to talk about it, but...” She paused and cast a glance at Makero, her eyes clouding. “There’s something I have to do right now. It’ll just take a second.”

Dash nodded kindly and instantly rose to his paws. “Do you need help? You really pushed yourself hard last night. I’m sure you must be sore.”

Saderia's eyes glittered with appreciation. "Yeah, I guess I did work a little too hard yesterday. But you did too. Wouldn't helping me hurt you?"

Dash chuckled warmly. "I'll be fine. You worry too much."

She shrugged and managed a playful smile. "I got it from you."

"Fair enough." Dash grinned, then leaned down to help her up.

Unable to hide a smile, Saderia pushed herself to her paws, her legs wobbling unsteadily. Pain shot through her legs the instant she tried to stand and she stumbled to the side, but Dash hastily lunged toward her and caught her before she could fall, pressing his soft fur against her side. Gratefully, she leaned against him until she found her balance. "Thanks," she murmured, giving him a friendly smile. "I think I'll be fine now."

Dash hesitated, then reluctantly stepped away to let her walk on her own.

Saderia shot him a grateful smile, then turned around and padded unsteadily toward Makero, her legs aching with every movement but her amber eyes gleaming in the bright light of the sun. Ignoring the pain, she stepped across the grassy clearing, moving past the sleeping forms of Dingo and Jeb. Chuckling at her sleepy friends, she staggered over to her father and paused just a few paces away from him. Out of the corner of his eye, the King spotted her behind him and quickly turned to face her, interrupting the conversation between him and his companions. Blinking in surprise, he cast a glance back at Cia, Uncle Jash, and Jeb's parents, then stepped away from the crowd and padded closer to her until he stood with her a few paces away from the house, still shadowed by the dilapidated den.

A weak smile crossed his face. "I see you're still sore. Did you sleep well?"

Saderia hesitated, then shrugged. "That depends on what you mean by 'sleep well,'" she replied, thinking of her Dream. "But...there's something I wanted to tell you."

Makero tipped his head to the side, his green eyes gleaming with confusion and wonder. "What is it? Did you see something in your sleep?"

"Sort of." She hesitated, then heaved a sigh. "I did have a Dream, but...I learned something else in my sleep." When he blinked in bewilderment, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think my Mom is okay."

Makero's eyes widened in shock, then lit up with hope. A warm, relieved smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Really? You know she's okay?"

"Well..." Saderia bit her lip and glanced away uncomfortably, not wanting to get his hopes up too high but still wanting to reassure him. "I have reason to believe she's *probably* okay. But...I also have reason to believe she might be in a...situation."

His smile faltered with concern. "What kind of situation? Is she in danger?"

"I...I don't really know," Saderia admitted, letting out a soft breath and studying her paws. "But I do think she'll be okay."

Makero frowned and studied her for a long moment, his eyes narrowed with unease. A million questions seemed to swirl through his mind and flicker in his eyes, but he seemed to realize that Saderia would have told him all she knew. Taking a deep breath, he met her gaze with tired green eyes and heaved a sigh. "Are you sure she's okay?"

Saderia hesitated, then nodded slowly. "I'm sure of it."

His wistful, cloudy eyes bored into hers. "And you think she's going to be okay?"

Saderia nodded grimly. "Yes. Don't worry too much. I know she's often on your mind."

Makero heaved a soft sigh. "Yes, she is." He paused, then managed a weak, grateful smile. "Thank you for telling me this."

"No problem." Saderia weakly returned the smile, then turned to walk back to her friends, feeling a sense of relief at being able to ease her father's worry. On aching legs, she padded back toward her friends. By that time, Dingo and Jeb had woken up and moved to stand around Dash to wait for her return. Wonder gleamed in Jeb's eyes as he gazed curiously around at the woods, as stunned as the day he had first seen it. Dingo sat a few paces away, blinking sleep out of his eyes and casting a disgruntled, grumpy glance at the prickly ground, as if blaming it for a bad night's sleep. Watching them with an amused grin, Dash looked up at the sound of her paw steps and smiled warmly, giving her a friendly wave.

"Feeling any better?" he asked, his eyes flicking worriedly to her shaky paws.

Saderia flicked him playfully with her tail. "I'm fine, just a little sore. I'll live."

Dash nodded sheepishly and quickly shifted to the side to give her a comfortable place to sit with her circle of friends. The dark lion gave her a friendly flick of his tail, then narrowed his eyes more seriously. "So what was your Dream about?"

Dingo pricked his ears and looked up with curious light brown eyes, his expression guarded. "Did you talk to... Claw?"

Saderia nodded absently. "Yes, I spoke to Claw. She told me about my Mom."

Dash's eyes widened and his amber irises lit up with hope. "What did she say?"

Saderia bit her lip and glanced around at her friends, trying to decide what to say. Her eyes flicked from Dash's eager face to Dingo's guarded expression and Jeb's bewildered bicolor eyes. Taking a deep breath, she dropped her voice to a soft murmur and quickly told them everything Claw had told her, leaving nothing out. Her three friends crowded around and leaned in to listen, their eyes gleaming with wonder and their faces mystified. Narrowing her eyes in thought, Saderia quietly finished her recount of the meeting, then looked up with glowing amber eyes, waiting for her friends' reactions.

Silence filled the air.

Dash stared at her for several heartbeats of silence, his eyes wide with amazement. Blinking rapidly, he shook himself and took a deep breath, struggling to gather his thoughts. "It...It's good that Karenisha's okay...I wonder what happened to her, though."

Saderia shrugged absently. "That's all Claw told me. I'm sure she'll tell me more once she knows more, though."

Dingo narrowed his eyes, his light brown irises wistful and his voice soft and dreamy. "Of course she will..." Shaking himself, he hardened his dreamy expression into a more guarded look and spoke in his usual cool tone of voice. "So...I assume we're going to be leaving soon to look for her?"

Saderia nodded and looked down uncomfortably, her eyes clouding. "Yes. I do want to leave soon. But I have to wait for the right moment." She

paused, then narrowed her eyes and let out a soft sigh. "I just hope my Dad won't be too upset when we leave."

Dash's gaze softened and he rested his tail reassuringly on her shoulder, trying to hide the guilt in his eyes. "We'll leave him a note or something..." He paused, then frowned uncertainly. "Although...maybe leaving him without a word is a bad idea."

Saderia narrowed her eyes sternly. "It's not like we can tell him. He would never let us leave. You know that."

Jeb shivered nervously and glanced at his paws. "Maybe he has good reason to."

"Maybe, maybe not." Saderia shrugged indifferently. "It doesn't matter. We know how to take care of ourselves. We've survived the desert before and we can do it again. Besides, we have Dingo to lead us and he's never let us down." She paused, then glanced guiltily at her paws. "Look, I really wish we wouldn't have to leave and make him worry about us. But we need to find my Mom, and Dad needs to stay and help repair the forest."

Dash frowned and narrowed his eyes curiously. "So what are we going to do to help the forest? We're not leaving immediately, are we?"

"No, of course not." She flicked her tail and gazed thoughtfully at the woods. "We still have to repair the forest. But when the forest is almost fully repaired, we'll leave. Until then, I'm hoping Claw will keep me updated on what's happening with my Mom."

"I hope so, too." Dash sighed and cast a dark, restless glance at his paws. "I just feel so bad for Karenisha. I mean, she really thought we were all dead. She might still think that. That must have been really hard on her..."

Saderia heaved a sigh and looked away, her eyes gleaming with regret. "I know. I almost wish we hadn't left her alone, but...we had to save my Dad." Taking a deep breath, she gazed wistfully up at the sky. "Hopefully, this will all work out somehow."

Dash nodded soberly, then eyed her curiously. "So what was your Dream about?"

A shiver raced down Saderia's spine at the thought of the Dream. Suppressing a shudder, she took a deep breath and reluctantly started telling them about the creepy nightmare. Before she had even finished telling them

about the eerie voice at the beginning of her Dream, though, the three of them jumped in with questions she couldn't answer.

"Whose voice was it?" Jeb whispered, his fur rising up in fear.

Saderia shrugged. "I don't know. I mean...it sounded familiar...very familiar." A shiver raced through her and a cold sense of dread and unease swept over her, bringing a deep frown to her face. "I...I just can't put my paw on it, though. I never got to see who it was."

Dash frowned and studied her curiously. "What did the voice sound like?"

"I don't really know," Saderia repeated, giving them a sheepish glance and a helpless shrug of her shoulders. "The voice was dark and kind of low, but there are a lot of animals I've met with low voices. I don't really remember it well. It's just too confusing."

He heaved a sigh. "All right. I understand. What was the rest of the Dream like?"

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia started to describe the next part of the Dream. Dingo's ears pricked up instantly and his eyes gleamed with wonder when he realized the next scene had taken place in the desert. As soon as Saderia finished telling them how she had stood on that strange rock formation, gazing out at all the dingoes and hearing the strange figure beside her say those eerie words, her canine friend instantly jumped in with questions.

"What do the dingoes have to do with anything?" he demanded, narrowing his eyes with a deep frown. "I thought we left them behind in the desert."

Saderia shrugged hopelessly. "I don't know. It doesn't make much sense to me, but...does anything in that part of the Dream sound familiar to you?"

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought, his light brown irises darkening. "Well...the dingoes have always thought they were better than everybody and that they deserved to rule everything and everyone, like the dingo's voice said in your Dream. I don't know if that's particularly important..."

Dash's eyes gleamed with seriousness. "If it was in her Dream, it's important."

Dingo shrugged. "In that case, if that dingo really did want to 'rule everything,' I don't see how he might accomplish that. Unless he wanted to attack somebody."

Saderia's fur bristled in alarm. "So the dingoes might want to attack...the forest?"

"Possibly." Dingo flicked his tail calmly and gave them an indifferent shrug. "But that hardly means anything. Dingoes want to attack everything. They've known about the forest for centuries and never touched it before, so I don't see why they would attack now, but even if they do, you would have the advantage. You have slightly greater numbers and you're familiar with your own land. If the dingoes came in here to attack, they would have to deal with prickly undergrowth and roots, which would trip them up and make them easy targets." Dingo flicked his ears nonchalantly. "I wouldn't worry about it. They probably wouldn't get any farther than a few feet into the forest even if they did come."

Knowing his words had some wisdom, Saderia tried to relax and forced her fur to lie flat. Even as she tried to calm down, though, an ominous feeling burned in the back of her mind. "Okay...I guess you're right. I can't really picture them attacking now anyway. My Dream must have meant something else." She paused, then frowned in bewilderment. "What about that huge platform, though? I never saw anything like that in the desert."

Dingo narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Me neither. Describe it."

"Well...It was...up in the air. It was made entirely of rock. I didn't see much of it, but I could tell it was really high up. I was standing on the edge of a rock platform that hung over open air. When I looked over the edge, I could see tons of dingoes below me...Do you remember anything like that in the desert?"

Dingo shook his head slowly, his light brown eyes clouding with bewilderment. "No...But I haven't seen everything the pack's been doing since I left either. I only spied on them a few times, not enough to learn anything important." He frowned. "But that rock thing sounds really strange. I've never seen anything like that in the desert."

Saderia nodded slowly, narrowing her eyes in thought and heaving a sigh. "That's what I thought. It seemed odd, but I don't know what it could be...I hate it when I can't understand my Dreams." Lashing her tail in

frustration, she struggled to think of any other detail that would help her understand. A vague memory flitted through her mind, making her frown in wonder. "There was something else in my Dream. A dingo was on the rock beside me...He had this...dusty dark brown fur. Do you know who it could be?"

Dingo's eyes narrowed with unease. "Did he have long fur? Longer than mine?"

Frowning, Saderia narrowed her eyes in thought, studying Dingo's scruffy fur intently and struggling to remember more about the strange mystery dingo. "I...*think* so."

A grave shadow darkened Dingo's brown eyes. "Well, I'm sure there are plenty of long-haired, dark-furred dingoes in the pack, but the one I remember the most is Rock."

Saderia blinked in shock. "You mean the pack's new Leader? The one out to get you?"

He nodded grimly, his brown eyes dark and grave. "You met him once when we went to find Makero. He attacked us with Rip and another dingo."

Alarm shot through Saderia at the memory, raising all the fur along her back. She distinctly remembered the cruel, new dingo Leader that had terrorized them in the desert. Rock...Bone's replacement and practically his double in terms of cruelty...the one thirsty for Dingo's blood. Though she hadn't been able to see clearly in her Dream, the similarities between Rock and the shaggy dark brown dingo in her nightmare were too eerie to ignore. Things like that were rarely a coincidence...but what did it mean?

Jeb shivered and gazed up at her with wide eyes, his blue and green irises gleaming with confusion and a hint of fear. "What happened next?"

Saderia blinked several times, then shook herself and quickly started to describe the next part of her Dream, trying to hide the unease darkening her amber eyes.

Dash's eyes widened in shock when she finished speaking. "You saw Karenisha?"

"I think so," she murmured, her eyes shadowed and her mind whirling with an eerie sense of dread. "She wasn't in good condition and she still thinks we're dead. But I don't know where she was, why she was there, or what was going on. Maybe she's in better condition right now and

only gets worse sometime in the future..." A shiver raced down her spine and she nervously trailed off, her eyes clouding. "She looked pretty bad when I saw her in the Dream, but I do trust Claw, and Claw told me she was fine..."

Dingo narrowed his eyes firmly, his light brown irises gleaming defensively and his tail flicking sharply. "Claw wouldn't lie about something like that. Trust me."

Saderia nodded absently, her eyes clouded with unease. "I believe you, Dingo." She paused, then glanced uncomfortably at her paws. "Should I go on to the next part?"

When they agreed, she took a deep breath and started to detail the next part of her Dream. Less an actual, meaningful scene than a jumbled mess of feelings and creepy figures, she doubted she would be able to make sense of it, but she left out no detail.

A shiver of fear raced down Jeb's spine, making his eyes open wide with fear when she finished her story. "It almost sounds like you were... attacked."

"It does..." Saderia winced, then let out a weary sigh and carefully finished describing the last part of her Dream. A dark sense of worry rose in her chest when she ended her story with the eerie words she had heard at the end of her Dream. "*Kill her.*"

Silence fell over the four of them.

Dash narrowed his eyes uncertainly, a nervous gleam in their shadowed amber depths. "And you don't know who this voice belonged to either?"

Saderia shook her head grimly. "I just can't think of it. I mean, the voice is familiar and it's right on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't think!"

He nodded slowly, his eyes clouding with sympathy. "It's okay. I understand."

Dingo narrowed his eyes darkly, his light brown irises clouded with confusion and his tail twitching anxiously back and forth. "Who's telling who to kill you?"

"I don't know..." Her voice sounded distant and her eyes clouded with a dark sense of dread. A shiver crept down her spine and a cold feeling of disquiet swept over her, making her heart freeze. Her mind whirled with

unease. It wasn't just the voice at the end that bothered her... "Before I heard that voice, I felt a sense of betrayal..." Her eyes clouded and darkened. "So either the voice telling someone to kill me or the one the voice commanded was someone I know. Either way, someone I trust is going to betray me."

Chapter Five

Expectations

“What?” Dash gaped at her in shock. *“Who would do that?”* He paused, then flattened his ears, his amber eyes glowing with alarm. *“You don’t mean one of us, right?”*

“Why would any of us betray her?” Dingo snapped, curling his lip and casting Dash a scornful look.

“I wouldn’t!” Jeb’s eyes widened in fear. *“I would never! You guys are my friends!”*

Saderia rested her tail reassuringly on his shoulder, her eyes calm and sympathetic. *“Relax, Jeb. I highly doubt any of you would betray me. I mean, we’ve been through so much together. Bonds like that don’t get broken easily.”* Her words filled her with a sense of peace and she slowly started to relax, finding comfort in what she knew to be true. No matter what happened, her closest friends would always stay loyal. Jeb was too kind and timid to do anything bad, Dingo was the very definition of loyal, and Dash...Dash had been her very first friend, the one who had stuck with her through thick and thin. The dark lion was her oldest and closest friend, someone who was always there for her and always looking out for her. Not even in her dreams would Dash ever betray her.

Dash let out a sigh, his bristling fur beginning to lie flat. *“You’re right. None of us would ever do anything to hurt each other...I wonder what your Dream meant, though.”*

Saderia let out a sigh. *“I don’t know...But I guess I’ll find out sooner or later.”*

Dash opened his mouth to speak, then broke off abruptly at the soft sound of paw steps behind him. Blinking in surprise, he whirled around with his three friends just in time to see Makero step up behind them and pause.

The King stopped in front of them and eyed them with a guarded expression, his green irises shadowed with worry and unease. His tail

twitched anxiously across the dewy grass. “Good morning, you four. Cia, Jash, and I are going to get to work on cleaning up the inside of the house. Jeb, your parents are going to check out your new home. If you four are too sore from last night, you don’t have to help us with the house, but...”

“I’ll help.” Saderia hastily leapt to her paws, her eyes shining with determination. “I don’t care how sore I am. I want to fix the house as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll help, too,” Dash agreed, leaping to his paws and facing Makero with confident, eager eyes despite the pained look that crossed his face.

Dingo rose to his paws and dipped his head to Makero. “I’ll do what I can.”

“I...I’ll help, too,” Jeb stammered, stumbling nervously to his paws. “I guess my parents will be all right on their own. They know where the house is, right?”

Makero nodded. “Yes. I’ll lead them there before we get started.” He glanced at the house, then looked back at the four of them. “I was thinking Cia, Jash, and I could work on the left side of the house, and you four could work on Saderia and Dash’s bedrooms.”

Dash smiled and nodded eagerly, his amber eyes shining. “That sounds fine. Don’t worry. We can handle it,” he added, seeing the worried gleam in the King’s eyes.

Saderia nodded determinedly. “Yeah, we’ll be fine, Dad. We’ll get the place cleaned up, and then we can work on fixing the walls and the roof.”

Makero managed a small smile. “All right.” He paused, then grimaced. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t rain before we fix the roof.”

Dingo’s eyes widened at his words and he looked up sharply, his light brown irises gleaming with alarm and his fur beginning to bristle. “Does it rain here often?”

Makero frowned in confusion. “Yes...Why?”

Dingo’s ears pricked in alarm, but Saderia rested her tail on his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, Dingo. It rains here a lot more than in the desert, but it doesn’t flood.”

Dingo frowned, his eyes clouding with bewilderment. “It doesn’t?”

She shook her head and lightly flicked her tail. “Nope.”

Dingo heaved a long sigh and forced himself to relax, making his fur lie flat. "If you say so. But I still don't trust rain."

She grinned and giggled to herself, trying to ignore a hint of unease at Makero's words. "We'll just have to work fast to make sure rain doesn't ruin our progress."

Makero shrugged, his gaze absent. "I suppose you're right." He paused and glanced back at the house to see Jeb's parents standing close beside Cia and Uncle Jash. A small smile crossed his face and he glanced back at Saderia with gleaming green eyes. "Well, I'll come check on you once I get Jeb's parents to their new home. Good luck."

"Thanks." Saderia gave him a warm smile, then turned around to pad toward her house, mentally bracing herself for the wreckage she might find inside. Her friends instantly fell into step behind her and followed her across the clearing toward her crumbling house. Behind them, Makero waved his tail toward Jeb's parents to signal for them to follow, then turned toward the dirt path. Seconds later, he vanished from sight.

Tearing her eyes off the path where her father disappeared, Saderia turned around and paused when she reached the front door of her house. Taking a deep breath, she glanced back at her friends, then gingerly pushed open the door. She expected the worst. Despite knowing that destruction awaited her inside, though, she still froze in shock at the awful sight that greeted her. The front room was destroyed. Several large cracks ran up and down the walls and split open the wood floor. The old computer that had been left on the desk in the corner had been smashed to pieces by a fallen tree. The desk it had been sitting on looked as if it had been chopped apart bit by bit. Dirty, ruined papers lay scattered all around the room—royal documents, old schoolwork, and other important mementos. Most of the papers had probably come from the smashed drawers against the left wall that had been reduced to little more than a pile of splinters and rubble.

Saderia heaved a long sigh. Beside her, Dash let out a stunned gasp. Gingerly, she crept through the room, picking her way around papers, splinters, and debris until she stood in the cracked archway that peered into the dining room and kitchen. Neither was in any better shape. The once shining gold table in the center of the dining room was still intact, but covered in dirt and grime. Most of the chairs around it were turned on their sides or smashed to bits. What remained of the chandelier over the table

was nothing but a bunch of broken glass scattered throughout the room. The kitchen was just as bad. The once beautiful railing separating it from the dining room lay on the ground in pieces. Only a few broken bits of it remained upright. Broken cupboards lay all over the kitchen. Most of the counters were cracked or smashed completely. The refrigerator lay face-down on the floor, its doors torn off. Knives, spoons, and cracked pots lay strewn across the floor.

Dash gazed around at the broken rooms in stony silence, a grave expression on his face. With a tired look, Saderia tore her gaze off the once lavish rooms and peered past the dining room into the living room. The television lay on its side, its screen shattered. Most of the couches had been knocked over. One of the formerly soft, smooth couches had been torn apart. Vicious cuts tore across the dirty fabric and white stuffing popped out of the holes until it was almost unrecognizable. Ruined books were scattered all across the room, flung from the toppled rubble that used to be the grand bookshelves. The trap door in the center of the room had been exposed since the couch hiding it had been flung to the side. The wood had rotted even more since the last time she had seen it. Several cracks had been struck into the weathered boards.

Heaving a sigh, Saderia looked back into the front room to see her friends surveying the damage behind her. A dark, stony expression covered Dash's face as he took in the wreckage, but he didn't say a word. Behind him, Dingo crept hesitantly into the front room, his eyes wide with amazement. Seeming not to notice the wreckage, the desert canine gaped at the enormous den in awe. Jeb slunk in after him, gazing silently around at the front room with incredulity and disbelief, stunned by everything around him. A fearful gleam crept into his eyes as he took in all the wreckage.

When Dash looked up at her, Saderia slowly turned to meet his gaze. Many thoughts passed between them with no words exchanged. They both knew that expecting their home to be in good condition was a mistake and that they would have to work hard to get the house back to the way it had been before. Obviously, it might take a long time. Fortunately, they also knew they would work together to get it done as fast as they could.

Giving her friend a knowing look and a nod, Saderia turned away from him and glanced back at Dingo and Jeb. A sheepish expression spread

across her face and she shrugged uncomfortably. “Well...I know it’s not much, but...welcome to our home.”

Dingo gaped at her in disbelief. “Not much? This place is *huge*!”

“Yeah!” Jeb exclaimed, his voice high with shock and his eyes wide with amazement. “And some of the stuff here is really weird!”

Glancing around and taking in the damage for the first time, Dingo simply shrugged and flicked his tail, his light brown eyes calm. “It’s just a little bit of a mess. I wouldn’t worry about it. We can probably fix this in a few days.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then smiled and shook her head. Dingo the optimist. What irony. Rolling her eyes, she turned to face the dark hallway leading to her room and signaled for her friends to follow her. “This is the way to our rooms,” she called, pointing with her tail. “They probably won’t look any better, but...we’ll fix them somehow.”

When her friends nodded and moved to follow her, she headed toward the hallway and crept into the darkness with her friends close behind her. At the end of the cracked, dirt-ridden hallway were two familiar doors leading to her room and Dash’s room. Expecting nothing less than utter destruction, she pushed open the door to her room and winced. Her old sanctuary was in as much disarray as the rest of the house.

An enormous hole smashed through most of her ceiling. Twigs, dirt, and debris littered every inch of the room. Her old blue bed was split in half. The wooden frame was covered in deep cracks and lay pitifully on its side. Her once soft mattress had been ripped apart by a fallen tree. White stuffing burst out from the sliced mattress and covered the floor. Bits of fluff and strips of fabric were all that were left of her blue blanket and pillows. Either trees or rats had destroyed them. Either way, they were ruined. The splintered door to her closet hung limply on its hinges at an awkward angle, exposing the closet’s smashed interior. The file cabinet on one wall was smashed, its drawers hanging by their hinges or lying all over the floor. Papers filled with memories from her past lay scattered throughout the room, ruined by dirt, debris, and rain.

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, pushing back a wave of despair. Somehow, she had to get her room back to a good state. When her friends crept into the room behind her, she turned and found

Dash's eyes. "Do you want to go work on your room or do you want to start here?"

Dash flicked his tail at the mess. "Let's start here."

Saderia nodded and gazed thoughtfully around at the room, trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling of her friends' eyes boring into her back. Her mind whirled as she struggled to come up with a plan. Where to start... "Um...How about we start cleaning this place up by getting rid of all the dirt and debris? We can just sweep it all into a corner for now. Later, we can get a bucket and fill it with water from a stream to clean it better, but right now, let's focus on picking up the debris. After that, we'll work on rebuilding the bed. We can probably get wood to rebuild it with from those fallen trees even though it might be difficult. Once that's done, we can try to repair that hole in the roof and wall, and then move on to Dash's room." Trailing off, Saderia quickly glanced at Dash and felt a warm rush of pride and relief when he caught her eye and nodded warmly in approval.

Feeling a glimmer of pride, Saderia stepped into her room with her friends close behind her. Each of them quickly moved to a different part of her room. Taking up a spot near her wrecked bed, Saderia swept the ground with her fluffy tail, pushing the dirt and debris toward the closest corner. The next few hours passed in silence with occasional complaints or coughing when dust was swept into someone's face. Once in a while, one of her friends would hold up some destroyed piece of her past and ask anxiously if it should be thrown out. Deep down, it hurt to throw out some of the old, ruined papers and other destroyed sentiments of her past, but she knew they were damaged beyond repair. Ignoring the sting of regret, she assured them it was okay to dispose of them for good.

A few short hours later, the room was still filthy, but at least the floor wasn't covered in debris. If nothing else, it was easier to walk around without worrying about tripping or treading in dirt. The corners were piled high with dirt and twigs. Saderia's fluffy tail was covered with a thick layer of filth and carried with it clinging twigs and debris, but she ignored it and decided to clean it later.

After a break, they started on the next task. When they had cleaned the room, the twigs and bark that had fallen off the fallen tree had been swept into one specific corner. The four friends quickly gathered up all the twigs and salvaged as much wood as they could from the broken furniture.

When they had gathered as many pieces of wood as possible, they turned the wooden bed frame back to its upright position and slid pieces of wood under the destroyed posts to balance it out. Once the bed was upright, they wrestled with the split mattress until they had pushed all the stuffing back into it, then threw it back onto the bed. It was far from perfect, but Saderia was satisfied with the temporary repairs.

In the middle of the day, Saderia and her friends took a short break and met with her family in the front room. Clearly, her parents' and aunt and uncle's rooms hadn't been in any better shape, but they had made a little progress with them. Makero told the others to let him worry about fixing the holes in the roof and walls. Considering she had no clue how to go about doing that, Saderia was content to leave that job to him. Her father warned her that when he did repair the roof, it would only be a temporary fix until he came up with something better, but that hardly mattered to her. Temporary solutions meant quicker work. And the quicker the work, the sooner she could look for her mother.

When she mentioned getting back to work, her father was reluctant to let her go back and push herself any further. He tried to convince her to take a break with her friends while he and her aunt and uncle worked. Once, he even suggested that she sit out while her friends worked without her, but she insisted she do her part. Her friends and family weren't her slaves. The house was hers to rebuild, as well. At her insistence, Makero reluctantly relented and suggested they clear the debris out of Dash's room, then move on to other rooms while he handled the roof. She agreed, and once the break ended, she and her friends headed toward Dash's room at the end of the hall, not noticing the fearful expression on Makero's face. As soon as they reached the room, they got to work.

After a few minutes of clearing debris, Dingo let out a low whistle and shook his head in incredulity. "I still can't believe you live here. This room alone is almost twice the size of two dingo dens combined."

Saderia's face grew hot with embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

Dingo just shook his head and gazed around at the room with eyes wide with amazement. Blinking out of his thoughts, he turned back to sweeping at a pile of debris and raised an eyebrow curiously. "So if we're going to look for your mother...how exactly are we going to go about doing that?"

Dash pricked his ears and looked up with eyes wide with wonder. “Yeah, Saderia, where do you think we should start looking? I mean, Karenisha could be anywhere.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then felt a dull sense of dread and dismay seep into her heart as Dash’s words sank in. He was right. Lately, she had been so preoccupied with speeding up time that she hadn’t left enough time to think about *where* she would begin her search. Silently seething, she lashed her tail and gritted her teeth, furious with herself for getting so far ahead of herself. When was she going to stop being so rash? Feeling her friends’ eyes boring uncomfortably into her back, she bit her lip and narrowed her eyes, knowing she had to come up with an answer but not knowing what to say.

Jeb looked up nervously, his eyes gleaming with unease. “I always just assumed we would go through the desert again. That’s where we found your Dad, after all.”

Saderia took a deep breath and tried to relax. The desert did seem to be a good place to start looking, which was both a good thing and a bad thing. On one hand, the desert was at least relatively familiar, but on the other hand, finding someone lost in the desert was next to impossible. Then again, she had Claw *and* Dingo on her side this time... Taking a deep breath, she faced her friends and struggled to get her thoughts together. “I don’t know where Mom is, but the desert does seem like a likely place. It is possible that she could have gone through the desert and wound up in another place entirely, but I’ll have to hope that hasn’t happened. Anyway, while we’re working, I’ll try to think of the most likely places she could be. And if all else fails, maybe Claw will give me a hint.” The instant the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Not just because Dingo was in the room to hear it and feel uncomfortable, but because of a deeper feeling of apprehension bubbling in the pit of her stomach. Maybe she shouldn’t put so much pressure on her spirit guide, just in case she couldn’t help... Stifling the uncomfortable feeling, she turned back to the task of cleaning Dash’s room, trying to distance herself from her worry.

Not noticing her discomfort, Dash looked up with a sudden dark, grave glint in his amber eyes. “What about Makero?”

Saderia stiffened and abruptly looked away, hiding her guilt. “What *about* him?”

Dash narrowed his eyes and gave her a stern, knowing look that she ignored. Heaving a sigh, he met her gaze as calmly as possible. "What will happen to him when we leave? What will he think?"

Saderia took a deep breath and tried to keep her voice cool and calm. "Well...I assume he'll think we've gone to look for Mom, especially since I plan on leaving a note. I think he'll be worried, but I'll be sure to emphasize in the note that we have Dingo with us, who can lead us through the desert, and Jeb, who can lead us through his forest if we happen to go there. I'll remind him that we've always managed to survive before and I might even tell him about my spirit guide before we leave." She paused, then narrowed her eyes uncertainly and gazed down at her paws with clouded amber eyes. "I'm sure he won't be too upset. I plan on leaving only after the forest is well on its way to recuperating. If the forest is in good shape when we leave, he won't be completely stressed. At least he won't have that extra stress of having to fix the forest."

Dash blinked several times, then slowly turned back to his work with dark, clouded eyes. Tense silence fell over them. After several long, quiet minutes of working, Dash broke the silence with a soft, hesitant voice. "I think he expects us to leave."

Saderia looked up and frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Makero," Dash murmured, looking up with shadowed amber eyes and a solemn, subdued expression. "Haven't you seen how he looks at us sometimes? He knows we plan on leaving to find Karenisha, and I think he even hopes we will. But of course he can't say that because what kind of father would he be if he asked his children to go out into danger? You can tell he's terrified of letting us leave, too. Didn't you see how nervous he was when we went back together to work on these rooms? He's afraid we'll slip away when his back is turned. Which, I suppose, is exactly what we plan on doing..."

Trailing off, he looked up thoughtfully and blinked in surprise when he found himself staring at three stunned pairs of eyes. Subconsciously, he looked away and shrugged sheepishly. "What? I'm the only one who's noticed?"

Saderia flattened her ears and gazed darkly at her paws. "I guess so..." Silence fell over them. After a long, tense moment, Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her amber eyes clouding with guilt. "That

must be why he wanted me to take a break and let the rest of you work. Then we would be separated. He knows I won't go alone."

Everyone exchanged long, tense glances, their eyes narrowed and uneasy. Guilt and regret stirred in the pit of Saderia's stomach. Suddenly, the prospect of leaving was much more complicated...Slowly, the four of them turned back to their work without a sound, keeping their eyes locked on their paws to avoid the tension. Saderia focused intently on sweeping debris and tried not to think too hard about Makero, while Dash turned awkwardly back to his work, his amber eyes clouding with regret and unease. Beside them, Jeb looked down nervously, as if he felt he was intruding on something.

Glancing back and forth between Saderia and Dash's uncomfortable faces, Dingo promptly turned back to his work and nonchalantly flicked his tail, keeping his gaze cool and unbothered and pretending nothing had happened. "So I take it we're going to start searching in the desert and go from there?"

Saderia nodded absently, her eyes shadowed. "Yeah...we'll do that."

Dingo coolly flicked his tail. "And when are we going to leave?"

Saderia let out a sigh. "Let's wait about a week and see what happens. Depending on what kind of progress we've made by then, we'll just have to take it from there."

Dingo nodded vaguely and turned back to his work, his expression guarded and his tail twitching coolly back and forth. The room remained silent for the rest of the day.

By the time night fell, the house was in much better condition. Saderia and Dash's rooms had been cleaned of dirt and debris. The dining room had been dusted, and the broken pieces of cabinets had been swept out of the kitchen. Though it no longer worked, the refrigerator had been set upright. In the living room, they had straightened up what remained of the still-recognizable bookshelves and salvaged what they could from the destroyed ones. Some of the couches had been set upright even though they were far from useable. Holes still covered the roof and walls, the only thing that worried Saderia. Makero had assured her he would fix them just as soon as he got more supplies. Hopefully, supplies would come quickly to them. The rest of the house, she could live with.

While she worked, Saderia had made herself focus on the plan and had tried to figure out what it was she needed to do to find her mother. Any fears, doubts, or guilty feelings had been pushed to the back of her mind. All they did was interfere with her thinking and destroy her plan. Eventually, she decided the desert was indeed the best place to start, although the thought of trying to find her mother in all that endless sand was less than reassuring. Especially considering she had no idea exactly where to start.

Maybe Claw could tell her where to begin. Then again, maybe she couldn't. The spirit had only given Saderia a minimum of information the last time they had spoken, so maybe Claw wouldn't tell her where exactly her mother's 'situation' was taking place. Why she wouldn't—or couldn't—tell her, Saderia didn't know. Claw had her reasons, though, and Saderia would have to trust her to know what was best. Of course, that meant she was back to square one with no idea of where her mother might be.

Until Claw found the right time to tell her more about her mother, Saderia was on her own and would have to take matters into her own hands. Finding her mother without otherworldly interference wasn't going to be easy, though. Maybe she would at least have a Dream that would give her some idea as to what to do...

Saderia's mind whirled with wild thoughts and plans. Trying to shut it all out and calm down, she heaved a sigh and settled down on the cool grass to gaze up at the stars. Dash lay close beside her, looking up at the star-speckled sky and smiling faintly. Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash were camping out just a few feet away from them. A little earlier, Jeb and his parents had left to find their new home and spend their first night in their new house. Dingo had left with them to try sleeping in his own new den. Though he didn't say anything, Saderia suspected he had left to ease Makero's nerves by separating himself from Saderia, a move that would assure the King that they wouldn't sneak away in the night.

Heaving a soft sigh, Saderia rested her head on her paws and stared up at the night sky. Dash laid his head down beside her, his messy brown mane falling over his face. A moment of silence spread out between them.

After a long moment of quiet, Dash glanced up at her and sighed. "I'm sorry if I made you feel bad today with that thing about your Dad."

She let out a soft breath and managed a weak smile. "It's okay. It's something I should have realized anyway." Seeing his doubtful expression, she gave him a playful flick of her tail. "Don't worry about it. I'm fine, and I've got everything under control."

Dash hesitated, then weakly smiled back. "Good. I'm glad." Letting out a relieved sigh, he closed his eyes and let his mane fall over his face. "Goodnight, Saderia."

"Goodnight," she murmured, smiling and closing her eyes while Dash pressed close to her. Just as she started to drift off into unconsciousness, she silently hoped she would get to speak to Claw. After all, she needed answers and it never hurt to ask. Every bit of information helped.

A heavy sigh breathed out of Claw's throat. Wearily, she gazed down at a misty circle carved into the sandy ground—the Seeing Circle, her portal to the living world. In the ethereal sphere swirled an image of the living world's shadowed, moonlit forest. Shrouded by the dark, overhanging canopy, Saderia and Dash lay side by side, hidden by the dark shadows of night. The spirit hadn't missed the flash of hope in Saderia's eyes before she fell asleep. The tiger Princess would be expecting a meeting tonight. Only Claw couldn't figure out what to tell her. Or what she *should* tell her. Surely it wasn't right to leave her in suspense when she had information that could help her save Karenisha. But what if that information led Saderia into danger? What if it got her killed?

Claw heaved a long sigh and laid down to bury her face in her paws. The image in the Circle flickered and turned blank the instant she tore her eyes off it. Fear and helplessness burned in the spirit's mind, making her heart skip a beat. It felt like she was walking on thin ice. Gritting her teeth, she struggled to think of what to tell Saderia. There was a fine line between telling her just enough to help her and plunging her into certain death, but she didn't know where the line was. Either way, she wasn't eager for Saderia to join her in the spirit realm any time soon. Did that mean she should err on the safe side and tell her nothing? Or was that cruel? Frustration boiled in Claw's chest and she dug her claws bitterly into the ghostly sand beneath her. Before she could even begin to make a decision, a low, eerie voice broke through her thoughts.

“Having trouble?”

Claw’s eyes widened in shock and she instantly whipped around, her fur bristling and a low, defensive growl rumbling in her throat. Her eyes widened in surprise and her heart skipped with shock when she saw a dark, shadowy spirit standing right behind her. “You...I know you.”

The shadowy ghost raised an eyebrow. “You do?”

“Sort of...” Claw narrowed her eyes and watched the ghost nervously, her tone wary and her eyes distrustful. This strange spirit gave her an uneasy feeling... “I’ve seen you watching that tiger, Karenisha.” Her eyes darkened at the words and a shadow flitted across her face. In the past few weeks, Claw had wandered into the spirit world’s version of the forest out of curiosity and spotted the shadowy figure staring down at one of the many Seeing Circles scattered throughout the spirit realm. Always, the dark spirit had been staring through the ethereal Circle into the living world, watching the very same tiger Claw had been watching with an eerie gleam in his amber eyes. The sight of him sent shivers racing down her spine. Something about the strange ghost was very off...

“Ah.” The spirit lightly flicked his shadowy tail, his voice cool and calm. “Yes, Karenisha is quite an interesting tiger, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is...” Claw’s eyes clouded with distrust and her voice came out as an absent, distracted murmur. “My reasons for watching her are strictly personal, though. Why do *you* watch her?”

A faint sneer crossed the spirit’s dark face. “She and I have... history.”

Claw narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Doubting the ghost would explain, she didn’t bother to ask. Instead, she turned back to her own blank Circle in the sand, not wanting to waste time talking to this strange ghost. “Well, I’m glad to see you’re so concerned about that tiger, but I have a bit of a dilemma I need to work out.”

Turning her back on him, she flattened her ears and tried to ignore him, then froze when a translucent tail flicked firmly onto her shoulder. Narrowing her eyes, she reluctantly looked back over her shoulder to see the spirit standing close behind her, his face unreadable but his amber eyes gleaming in the dim, sleepy light of the spirit world. “What kind of dilemma?” he asked, his voice silky and curious.

Claw met his stare with a face as shadowed and expressionless as his. "It's personal," she growled, her voice icy and her eyes flashing. Who was this ghost?

The spirit sneered and snickered to himself. "You're quite the feisty one, aren't you?" His amber eyes glowed in the dim light. "Yes, I've met animals like you."

Claw coolly flicked her tail and narrowed her eyes, not taking the bait. "I'm happy for you." Giving the spirit a cool, suspicious glare, she started to turn to walk away.

The spirit chuckled knowingly, not bothering to stop her. "This dilemma you have...I have to say, I sympathize. It is quite difficult trying to decide whether to tell someone what you know or leave them blissfully ignorant."

Claw froze in her tracks. A long silence spread out between the two ghosts. After a long, tense moment, Claw slowly turned back to face him, a shadowed, wary expression on her face. "What do you mean?"

The ghost calmly flicked his tail. "That tiger, Karenisha, has put herself in quite a situation, hasn't she? Now I'm sure that tiger has a family and I'm sure that family is worried about her. And I think you know her family."

Claw narrowed her eyes, her light brown irises growing dark with unease but her gaze hardening in a tense, guarded expression. "You know about Saderia."

A faint, triumphant sneer crept across the spirit's face. Slowly, he nodded.

Claw took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her mind whirling and her eyes clouding with an eerie sense of disquiet. It wasn't as if she tried to keep her meetings with Saderia a secret. She didn't care if the other ghosts knew she visited one of the living. This ghost wasn't like other ghosts, though. Something about this strange, unnerving spirit knowing about her nighttime meetings made a shiver race through her wispy fur. *How* did he know anyway? How did he even know who Saderia was?

The light brown spirit frowned and narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What did you mean when you said...it's difficult trying to decide what to tell someone?"

The spirit chuckled knowingly and sneered, as if reading the unspoken questions in her eyes. "You'll find that I know quite a bit about that tiger and her family," he replied, ignoring her question. "Karenisha is now in a dangerous situation and you need to decide what to tell her Princess daughter when you meet her again. Correct?"

Claw frowned, her eyes clouding with unease. "Well, yes, actually..."

The spirit narrowed his eyes and icily met her gaze with an eerie, knowing gleam in his eyes. "You do realize that if you tell the Princess where Karenisha is, she'll be tempted to go find her immediately."

Claw bit her lip and nodded, her ears flattening nervously. "Yes..."

The shadowy ghost coolly flicked his tail. "And the Princess has a track record of getting ahead of herself and getting herself in too deep."

Claw narrowed her eyes defensively, but said nothing and merely nodded. The statement held a bit of truth, after all. But how did *he* know that?

The spirit's gaze hardened and his eyes flashed in the darkness of the spirit realm. "Then you must also realize that if you tell her where Karenisha is now, she'll make a rash decision and rush there to save her. Immediately. And then..."

"...she'll most likely be killed," Claw murmured, her voice numb and her eyes clouded. A cold sense of fear and dismay washed over her, making her shiver and glance darkly down at her paws. The thought had flickered through her mind before.

"Exactly." The dark ghost coolly flicked his tail and firmly held her gaze, his eyes glinting with an eerie glow. "She and all her little friends. All of them will be killed before they even get close to Karenisha. As I'm sure you've seen, Karenisha's situation is a bit unstable right now. Throwing the Princess into the mix will just make everything worse."

Claw stayed silent, watching him with cold, shadowed brown eyes.

"Think about it," he urged, his voice smooth and his tail flicking lightly. "You don't *need* to send the Princess in there. Is Karenisha really in that much danger right now?"

Claw lashed her tail, her eyes suddenly flashing with fury. "It might not seem like it now, but you don't know her captors like I do! They're unpredictable! One minute, they could be calmly deciding what to do with

their prisoner, but the next, they might be screaming for her death. Not to mention all the horrible things they might do in the meantime...”

“I realize you might know Karenisha’s captors better than I do. But they clearly have a plan in the works.” The dark ghost calmly flicked his tail. “Let them figure out their plan so that you can counter it instead of guessing in the dark. And while they’re figuring their plan out, don’t send the Princess in to try to steal her mother back, not with so many of them guarding her. She’ll be dead within minutes.”

Claw frowned and studied him with dark, suspicious eyes, thinking over everything he had said. Though she hated to admit it, what he said made sense. The eerie spirit unnerved her and she didn’t like him at all, but the logic in his words *was* convincing. For now, maybe Saderia *was* better off not knowing her mother’s location...Narrowing her eyes, Claw studied the spirit with curious, distrustful brown irises. “I see what you’re saying, but...who are you? How do you know Saderia? And why are you helping her?”

The spirit snickered, his amber eyes flashing with an eerie, knowing gleam. “You don’t need to know who I am yet. And I have my reasons for helping her at the moment.” Slowly, he turned and started to walk away. Flicking his shadowy tail, he tossed his last words lazily over his shoulders. “As for the Princess and I...let’s just say, we have a rather...interesting history, as well.”

Chapter Six

A Matter Of Time

“So you’re sure you can’t tell me where she is?” Saderia stood tensely on the light brown sand of the ghost world, facing her spirit guide with wide, pleading amber eyes.

Claw looked uncomfortably down at her paws, her light brown eyes clouded and distressed. Weakly, she nodded without saying a word, avoiding meeting Saderia’s eyes.

Saderia heaved a long sigh and gazed down at her paws, her eyes clouded with pain and unease. “All right...She’s okay, though, right?”

Claw smiled weakly. “Yes, she’s fine. At least, her captors haven’t hurt her so far.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in alarm. “Her captors? What do you mean by that? Do you think they’re *planning* to hurt her?”

Claw raised a paw to stop her and heaved a weary sigh. “No, Saderia. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to worry you. She hasn’t been hurt, and I doubt she will be any time soon.”

Saderia nodded slowly, forcing her bristling fur to lie flat and trying to calm the wild pounding of her heart. No matter how hard she tried to relax, though, worry still gleamed in her eyes and she longed to know more. “Claw?” She hesitated, then narrowed her eyes, her amber irises gleaming with desperation. “Is she being cared for? Are her...captors feeding her? Do they seem to *want* to keep her alive?” Who *they* were, she didn’t know, but it didn’t matter. All that mattered was that they weren’t torturing her mother.

Claw gave her a reassuring smile. “Yes, they feed her twice a day. Although...she did refuse to eat at first, but she started eating a few days ago. She seems to want to live.”

Saderia let out a relieved sigh. “That’s good.” Pride shone in her eyes. If her mother was eating and still trying to survive, some of her

resilient spirit was still buried in her somewhere. Deep down, she was still the brave Karenisha she had always known.

Seeing the proud gleam in her eyes, Claw managed a faint smile, knowing what she was thinking. “You come from a long line of strong leaders, Saderia. Your mother will be strong, too. That, I can promise.” When Saderia offered her a grateful smile, Claw grinned back at her. After a moment of silence, the smile slipped off her face and a darker gleam of worry flickered into her eyes. Unconsciously, she pushed herself to her paws and started to pace back and forth across the sand, her eyes clouded with unease. Words spilled out of her mouth as if she was thinking out loud to solve a very difficult problem.

“I think Karenisha’s captors do want to keep her alive, which...is strange behavior for them. While they’re not exactly going out of their way to make her comfortable, they do check on her often and they feed her. They don’t even yell at her that often either.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then frowned, her eyes glimmering with unease. “Why would they yell at her at all? Just to be cruel? Or maybe to... break her?”

Claw shrugged absently. “Usually, those are the main reasons they would do it. Cruelty is certainly up their alley, and I’m sure they would want to break her down if she didn’t already seem broken. No offense to your mother—I’m just trying to think what they might be thinking.” The light spirit paced anxiously back and forth, her eyes narrowed in thought and her tail twitching nervously. “Her captors have been interrogating her lately. Sometimes, when she doesn’t answer a question to their satisfaction, they get angry”

“Interrogating her?” Saderia frowned in bewilderment. “About what?”

“Plenty of things. Her family, her home, her social status...I don’t know why they’re questioning her. I can’t make sense of it myself.” Claw frowned, her brown irises clouding with confusion. “They asked her where she came from. Obviously, they knew she came from the forest, but they seemed to want specifics. They asked her all sorts of questions about the forest, like if it had leaders. They also asked her if she had family.”

Saderia flattened her ears and frowned uncomfortably. “What did she say?”

Claw let out a sigh and gazed gravely down at her paws, a shadow flitting across her face. "She said she had a family, but that they were all dead."

Pain shot through Saderia, making her wince and look away, but a hint of confusion glowed in her eyes. "What about Cia and Uncle Jash? She didn't think they were dead."

Claw avoided her eyes. "She said she had a sister, but that she was 'probably dead now, too.'"

Saderia winced and looked away sharply, trying to hide the pain and guilt in her eyes. "How did she answer the other questions?"

Claw shrugged. "She just told them the truth. She didn't really see any reason not to. I don't either, for that matter. I don't know why her captors would want to know all these things and I don't know what they're planning."

Saderia frowned in confusion. "It sounds strange to me, too."

Claw heaved a weary sigh. "I guess I'll just keep watching them. A few times during their interrogation, Karenisha was vague, so they yelled at her, but they haven't done it since then. I don't think we have to worry about it too much."

Saderia nodded faintly, hiding the unease in her eyes. "All right. That is strange, though. I wonder what they're up to."

Claw shook her head slowly, her eyes clouded and bewildered. "Only time will tell." She paused, then turned back to face Saderia with sympathetic brown eyes. "Anyway, you should probably wake up now. I know you're just dying to get back to work."

Saderia paused, then nodded eagerly. "You're right. I am. I guess I should, uh, wake up, if that's all you've got to tell me." She paused, then studied Claw curiously, her amber eyes wide with wonder and gleaming with questions. Avoiding her gaze, the light spirit looked down at her paws and bit her lip, as if debating whether to say something. A frown spread across Saderia's face. "Claw? Is there something else I should know about?"

Claw narrowed her eyes and uncomfortably looked away, her light brown irises glimmering with unease. "No," she muttered after a long, lingering moment of silence. "I've told you everything you need to know for now."

Saderia frowned in confusion, then nodded slowly, her amber eyes gleaming with wonder. "All right...Tell me if something happens."

Claw nodded absently. "I will." With one last glance at Saderia, the spirit started to fade, making the ghost realm disappear with her. Just before Saderia drifted into sleep, she heard her spirit guide let out a weary sigh. A second later, all she saw was darkness.

Sunlight stung her eyes the instant they fluttered open. Wincing, Saderia weakly raised her head and looked around quizzically, her amber irises bewildered. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the light and the wide clearing around her came into view. Seeing the tall trees rising up around her and the grassy clearing spreading out before her, her memory returned to her. This was where she had camped out last night with Dash.

Sleepily, she glanced to the side, expecting to see her lion friend. Only Dash was no longer beside her. Blinking rapidly, Saderia lurched unsteadily to her paws, gave her legs a quick stretch, then glanced around curiously for any sign of Dash. Seconds later, she caught sight of a flash of dark brown fur and spotted him standing a few feet away in front of the dirt path leading into town. The dark lion stood with Makero, talking to a group of forest animals on the edge of the path. Each forest animal carried wooden boards, tools, and all kinds of supplies. Narrowing her eyes in wonder, Saderia bounded toward the group of animals and skidded to a stop just beside Dash.

"What's happening?" she asked, glancing curiously at the animals' supplies.

Dash looked up at her and grinned, his amber eyes sparkling. "These animals are giving us their supplies. They said they don't need them for their own homes anymore."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then broke out in a wide grin. "Thank you so much," she exclaimed, turning to the group of animals and giving them a warm, grateful nod.

The animals dipped their heads to her. "We're happy to help, Princess Saderia," a panther told her, his voice filled with respect and his eyes shining in the sunlight.

Makero dipped his head to the group of animals and faced them with a bright, grateful smile. "This is a very kind deed, one that is much

appreciated and that will not be forgotten. Thank you. If you ever need help with anything, please come to us.”

The animals nodded to him respectfully. “It’s no trouble, King Makero,” a cheetah replied, his voice warm and friendly. Giving the King deep bows, the animals turned and started to pad back down the dirt path, leaving their supplies behind. Seconds later, they vanished behind a wild wall of trees and undergrowth dappled with sunlight.

A relieved smile crossed Makero’s face as he stooped down to pick up the dropped tools. “This is great. With these supplies, I can fix the roof.” Catching Saderia’s glowing smile out of the corner of his eye, he gave her a playful grin. “It’s good to be home, isn’t it?”

Saderia grinned, her eyes glimmering with hope and excitement. “It sure is.”

Chuckling merrily to himself, the King grabbed the supplies, then whirled around to walk toward the house, leaving Saderia and Dash alone by the bright, sunlit path.

A warm smile crossed Saderia’s face as she watched her father walk away. Her heart glowed with hope. Finally, the animals were starting to trust and help each other again. The forest was finally beginning to feel more like home. If only her mother wasn’t missing...Pain stung her heart and she heaved a sigh, then looked up wearily to face her friend.

Dash gave her a friendly smile. “Good morning. I tried to wake you up when those animals came, but you wouldn’t wake up. Were you having some kind of Dream?”

“I talked to Claw,” she explained, her eyes growing clouded and misty as the meeting swirled through her mind. “I asked her about my Mom.”

Dash’s eyes darkened with sympathy. “Did she say anything?”

She shrugged absently. “She said Mom’s fine, but couldn’t say where she was.”

Dash frowned in confusion. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” Saderia sighed and lightly flicked her tail. “She must have her reasons, though. Claw wouldn’t withhold information without good reason. Trust me.”

Doubt glimmered in his eyes, but he said nothing. “Okay. If you believe that...”

“I do.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes wonderingly. “When we talked, Claw told me my Mom was being held and interrogated by captors. I don’t know why. I guess they must be planning something.” Lashing her tail, she glanced up at the sky and frowned in frustration. “I wish I knew what it was.”

Dash frowned. “Does Claw know?”

She shook her head absently. “I don’t think so. She’s just as baffled as me.”

Suspicion shone in his eyes. “You’re sure she’s not just hiding that information?”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then shook her head firmly. “No, she would tell me if she had any idea what they were planning. And even if she had to withhold that information, she would at least tell me she was withholding it. She’s honest with me.”

Disbelief shone in Dash’s eyes and he raised an eyebrow skeptically, but merely shrugged. “You’re usually good at judging character. I believe *you*, at least.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Claw is always honest. She tells me about everything she sees and all that’s going on even if she can’t elaborate for whatever reason.” She paused, then frowned wonderingly. “Although... she did act kind of weird this time.”

Dash tipped his head to the side in bewilderment. “Weird how?”

“I can’t explain it,” she murmured, scrunching up her face and twitching her tail anxiously back and forth, searching for words. “It’s just one of my instinctual feelings.”

He coolly flicked his tail. “Shouldn’t you investigate that instinct like you usually do?”

“No, because she’s my friend.” Saderia narrowed her eyes firmly. “If something’s really troubling her, Claw will probably tell me when she’s ready.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “But what if it has to do with Karenisha?”

“Then she’ll tell me when she’s ready.” Saderia narrowed her eyes and gave him a stern look. “I trust her. I have to trust her. She’s one of my friends, just like you and Dingo and Jeb. If I don’t trust all of you completely...then what do I have?”

Dash paused, then heaved a weary sigh. “You’re right. You should trust your friends.”

Saderia gave him a faint smile. “You, Dingo, Jeb, and Claw are the best friends in the world. I don’t ever have to worry about trusting you guys because I know you’ll always be there for me. That’s why I haven’t completely lost my mind knowing that my Mom’s missing. I know I have four friends who will help me out.”

Dash managed a weak smile. “I guess you’re right. If Claw is acting weird, I’m sure she has her reasons. Anyway, I’m sure this will all work out and we’ll find Karenisha soon.”

Saderia gave him a grateful smile and flicked him gently with her tail. “I’m sure we will.” She glanced at the house, then flicked her ears and sighed. “Now come on. We’ve still got a lot to fix. And little time to fix it...”

Two days passed by in a blur of exhaustion. Working almost nonstop, Saderia, her three friends, and her family managed to slowly clean up and repair the house. Makero had gotten a start on patching up the holes in the roof, though it would likely be a long time before they were fixed. Inside the house, Saderia and her friends and family had cleaned more rooms. The few pieces of furniture that *could* be fixed had been repaired. A few couches and beds now stood in decent condition, although they still looked rough. Even the refrigerator had been fixed. Whatever pieces of furniture they hadn’t been able to repair would have to be replaced. Still, the house looked better and better each day.

Late afternoon on the second day, Saderia collapsed onto the grass and let out a painful groan. Her paws ached and her muscles burned from the day’s work. A soft sigh sounded beside her as Dash collapsed onto the ground next to her. Dingo and Jeb plopped down on either side of them, looking as exhausted as she felt. Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash lingered somewhere inside the house, getting a few last bits of work done.

Catching her breath, Saderia glanced up at her friends and managed a weak smile. “So Dingo, Jeb, how are you two settling in?”

Dingo let out a soft chuckle and rolled his eyes. “I still hate trees with a passion. And vines. And those little prickly things on the ground. But other than that, I’m good.”

Dash rolled his eyes and hid a smile.

Grinning, Saderia turned to face Jeb with glowing amber eyes. "What about you, Jeb?"

Jeb shrugged nervously and shuffled his paws. "It's okay...I mean, it's not as bad as I thought. My parents just never leave the house. They think this place is creepy."

Saderia let out a soft, sympathetic sigh. "They'll come around eventually."

"I hope so," Jeb muttered, glancing doubtfully at his paws.

Saderia took a deep breath and gazed wistfully up at the stars, her eyes clouding with thought. "What do you think we should do tomorrow? My Dad has insisted that we don't help him with the holes in the walls and the ceiling, but I don't want to just sit around."

Dash blinked, then frowned cautiously. "Does that mean it's time to leave?"

Dingo and Jeb pricked their ears in surprise and turned to Saderia curiously.

Saderia frowned wonderingly, then shook her head firmly. "No. I want to make sure the whole forest is in good shape before we disappear." She paused, then felt her tail curl up in excitement and her eyes light up with hope when an idea flitted through her mind. "I know what we can do! We can go around to the other neighborhoods in the forest to see how they're doing and try to help them fix their homes faster."

Dash nodded thoughtfully. "That sounds good. I just hope Makero agrees to it."

Saderia shrugged absently and gazed at her paws, hiding the doubt in her eyes. "I'm sure he will..." Deep down, though, she wasn't entirely sure she was right. Lately, her father had seemed even more paranoid about them suddenly running off. He might not want them to go anywhere alone together. Unless they left someone behind, of course...

Before she could suggest someone stay behind, Jeb looked up anxiously, his eyes wide with alarm. "You mean, we would have to...be around all the other forest animals?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then felt a flash of sympathy toward the two foreign animals. "Yes," she murmured, letting out a soft sigh. "But I understand if you two would be uncomfortable meeting the other animals..."

I'm not actually sure how they would react to you either. If you want to stay behind, that's fine. Dash and I could go alone."

Jeb shuffled his paws guiltily. "Are you sure? I...do kind of want to stay behind."

Saderia smiled reassuringly. "Yeah, that would be fine. You could do some small tasks to help my family. Or you could just stay home with your parents in the meantime. I don't mind. I know you're still wary around the other animals, like they are around you."

Jeb's eyes glimmered with gratitude. "All right. I'll stay behind to help your Dad."

"All right." She pressed her paw lightly against his, then turned to face her canine friend with curious amber eyes. "What about you, Dingo? Do you want to stay behind, too?"

Dingo shrugged carelessly. "Honestly, I don't care if the other animals look at me weird or treat me like an outsider. I'm kind of used to it. I'll come with you, unless you think the other animals won't like it."

Saderia frowned thoughtfully. "They may be a little...nervous, at first, but they'll get used to you. Besides, I was thinking about going to the Home of the Leopards first, and the leopards are usually really nice and accepting."

Dash's eyes lit up with excitement. "That'd be great! I'd love to see Loki again."

Saderia smiled faintly. "Me too. But remember, the Home of the Leopards is in the worst shape, so we would probably have to work hard to help them."

"Oh, right." Dash paused, then shrugged lightly and gave her a weak smile. "Well, I'm glad we're going there first. I wonder how Loki and Lisa are holding up."

"They're probably fine," Saderia assured him with a faint smile. "Loki always bounces back." She paused, then eagerly flicked her tail. "We should see how Tawny is doing, too."

Dash's eyes lit up with an eager glow. "Definitely! She's always so cute!"

Saderia smiled, then let out a sigh and glanced anxiously at the dirt path leading into town, her eyes clouding with worry. "I hope the Home of the Leopards isn't too bad." Even as she spoke, she prepared herself for the

worst. All she could hope for was for the poor neighborhood to not be in complete ruin when she got there and for Loki and the leopards to be safe and happy. All she could wish for was for the leopards to be able to build their neighborhood back up as quickly as possible. After all, the sooner everything was repaired, the sooner she could start searching for her mother and find out what Claw couldn't tell her...

"Are we there yet?" Dingo grumbled, pulling a sharp thorn out of his paw.

Saderia cast him a sympathetic glance. "Almost. The Home of the Leopards' clearing is just up ahead, so we should get out of the woods soon."

"I hope so." He irritably flicked his tail. "I swear, this forest is trying to kill me."

Saderia sighed and tried to hide a smile. Beside her, Dash glanced back at Dingo with raised eyebrows and snickered under his breath, earning him an annoyed growl. Shaking her head, Saderia just smiled and took the lead to guide them along the dirt path to the Home of the Leopards. The three friends walked along a dusty, worn road in the middle of the woods with Saderia in the lead and Dingo tailing behind. Lush trees rose up on either side of the path and created a thick, leafy canopy overhead, blocking out all but a few hints of light. Sparse grass dotted the path and grew wildly in the woods just beyond the beaten trail. A soft breeze whistled through the woods, rustling the leaves and carrying a cool, fresh scent on the air. Unlike the dirt path leading to Saderia's house, the trail leading to the Home of the Leopards was wilder. Fallen leaves, twigs, weeds, and prickly thorns covered the path, each proving a hazard to Saderia's desert friend.

Earlier that morning, Saderia had asked her father if they could visit the leopards while he stayed behind to work on the house. At first, the King had been reluctant to let them leave. The fear in his eyes had been nearly tangible. Only after Saderia told him that Jeb was staying behind did he finally agree. His reactions and the aura of fear about him only proved what Saderia already knew. Her father was terrified they would run away to look for Karenisha. The thought filled her with a painful sense of guilt and regret.

Shaking off her dark thoughts, Saderia looked ahead and spotted a small break in the trees just a few feet in front of her. Her friends hurried after her as she picked up her pace and moved faster. Ahead of her, the trees fell off to the side and the path suddenly opened up into a wide, dusty clearing. Preparing for a horrible sight, Saderia took a deep breath, glanced back at her friends, then stepped out into the clearing of the Home of the Leopards.

Shock gleamed in her amber eyes as she took in the damage. It... actually wasn't that bad. Not as bad as she had imagined, anyway. Fallen trees lay all across the clearing, their bark splintered and their branches a mess. Several trees sliced straight through the tiny wooden houses. Some homes were little more than a pile of dirty boards, broken furniture, and rubble. Only a few houses seemed truly livable. Most of them were riddled with holes and cracks, with boards hanging off them at awkward angles. Considering the state of the houses, the leopards might be better off tearing them down and rebuilding them from scratch. The neighborhood was nowhere near in good condition, but it wasn't the awful, boards-strewn, debris-ridden disaster she had imagined. Maybe it was best to keep her expectations low so that the bad things actually seemed good...

Dash's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "This isn't so bad."

"Yeah, this isn't bad at all," she replied, smiling as she took in the neighborhood. It was definitely a fixer-upper, but she felt confident that they could repair it within a few days. And if the worst neighborhood in the forest could be fixed in so little time, then the other neighborhoods were probably well-off already. A faint smile spread across her face and her eyes glowed with excitement as she started to search for her friends.

Leopards gathered around the broken houses, carrying boards, tools, and other supplies. A quiet confidence hung over the clearing as they worked diligently on their homes. Leopards walked across the clearing in crowds, carrying supplies and rushing to help anyone in need. One strong-looking leopard paced from house to house, her brown eyes shining with pride. Recognizing Maeta, Saderia watched the leopard leader shout instructions to the leopards and walk throughout the clearing, overseeing their progress.

Gesturing to her friends, Saderia bounded across the clearing in Maeta's direction. Dash quickly fell into step behind her, while Dingo hung

back at the entrance.

“Maeta,” Saderia called, skidding to a stop just behind the leopard leader.

At the sound of her name, the leopard turned and smiled proudly when she saw them. “Hello, Princess Saderia. Hello, Prince Dash. Are you here to check on us?”

“Sort of.” Saderia gave her a faint smile. “We wanted to see how things were going and help you fix this place up a bit, if you’ll have us.”

Maeta nodded thoughtfully and gazed out at her home with a warm, proud gleam in her brown eyes. “Well, as you can see, we are doing fine. We have already made great progress. It might take a while, but we’ll get this place back to its former glory in no time. Loki and her friend, Lisa, are over there, helping Loki’s parents with their house, if you were looking for them. If you want to help, you can help them with their house.”

“Okay.” A grateful smile spread across Saderia’s face. “Thanks, Maeta.” She paused, then offered her a sheepish smile and gazed up at her with hopeful amber eyes. “Oh, by the way, I brought my friend, Dingo, to help. I hope that’s okay.”

Maeta glanced toward the clearing entrance where Dingo stood and nodded kindly, a mild gleam of curiosity in her eyes. “That’s fine. The other leopards might be kind of wary, though, so make sure you introduce him and make sure they know he’s safe first.”

“Sure thing.” Saderia dipped her head to the leopard leader with a grateful smile. Returning the respectful gesture, Maeta gave them a warm smile, then turned and walked away to continue overseeing repairs. Saderia watched the leopard leader stalk away, then looked back at the sound of paws steps to see Dingo hesitantly creep up behind them, a cautious, wary expression on his face and a curious gleam in his light brown eyes.

A smile crossed Saderia’s face and she flicked him gently with her tail. “Come on. Let’s go meet Loki and see what we can do to help. And don’t worry. They won’t mind you.”

Dingo simply shrugged as she turned to lead the way deeper into the clearing. The canine glanced around curiously, taking in the sights in silence. Eyes locked on him and followed him the instant he set foot in the clearing. Every leopard in the area seemed to turn to watch him creep into

the neighborhood, but none of them abandoned their work. Curiosity and unease glimmered in the spotted animals' eyes, but they said nothing.

Ignoring the strange looks the leopards gave her friend, Saderia gazed around the clearing and grinned when she spotted Loki. The cheetah stood in front of a partially destroyed house next to her friend, Lisa, studying the ruined walls. Saderia's eyes lit up. Quickly, she gestured to her friends to follow her and bounded toward the cheetah.

Hearing her paw steps, Loki looked back and blinked in surprise when she spotted Saderia, then broke out in a wide grin. "Saderia! What are you doing here?"

Blinking in surprise, Lisa immediately turned around and smiled warmly as Saderia and Dash skidded to a halt in front of them with Dingo not far behind.

Grinning brightly, Saderia faced her friend and happily flicked her tail. "Hi, Loki. We just came to check on things and see if we could help."

Loki smirked, her green eyes flashing with a haughty gleam. "We're doing just fine. But, by all means, if you want to help, go ahead."

Saderia laughed. "This place does look pretty good. What do you want us to do?"

Loki shrugged nonchalantly. "We still have to clean up the inside of the house and repair the furniture a bit. You could help with that, if you want."

"Sure." Saderia grinned. "We already did that for our own house. It will be easy."

"Great." Noticing Dingo over Saderia's shoulder, Loki grinned and waved with a friendly glow in her bright green eyes. "I see you brought one of your friends."

Saderia smiled and nodded, while Dingo hesitantly waved back. "Yeah, he wanted to help, too," she replied, flicking him with her tail. "I hope that's okay with you guys."

"Oh, yeah, that's fine." Loki calmly flicked her tail and glanced back at a group of leopards moving around the house behind her. "Right, guys?"

The three leopards toting supplies around the side of the cracked house glanced back and nodded kindly, barely seeming to notice the strange dog. One sleek cheetah who walked with them paused and gave Dingo a

warm smile before ducking around the broken wall and vanishing from sight. Dingo's eyes widened in surprise at how quick they were to accept him and ignore his strange appearance. Saderia just smiled. The one cheetah was probably Loki's father and the three leopards were most likely her mother and brothers. If anyone would be willing to accept Dingo so easily, it would be Loki's family. If all of them were anything like their youngest member, they were probably the most laid-back family in the forest.

At a gesture from Loki, Saderia and her friends followed the cheetah/leopard into the dilapidated house through a shattered, door-less entrance. A tiny living room filled with rubble and only a few still-standing chairs welcomed them when they stepped inside. Several cracked doors led into different rooms—most likely bedrooms for Loki's family. Once inside, Loki padded over to one corner of the room to sweep at some of the rubble. Saderia quickly moved to join her, while Dash and Dingo took up positions with Lisa at another corner of the house. Outside, the almost rhythmic clinging and clanging sounds indicated Loki's family members were working on the outer walls.

"So..." Loki looked up at Saderia with curious green eyes as they swept the floor, her tail twitching eagerly back and forth. "How are things going with you?"

Saderia shrugged. "Good. Things seem fine here, too."

"They are." Loki paused and studied Saderia closely, a wondering gleam in her green eyes. After a long moment of hesitation, she gave her a cautious frown and narrowed her eyes. "What about...your mother? Have you heard anything about her?"

Saderia heaved a sigh and looked away, a dark shadow flitting across her face. Part of her wanted to tell Loki that she knew her mother was safe, but how could she explain how she knew? Her Dream sense was supposed to be a secret and she couldn't exactly say a ghost had told her. Biting her lip, she gazed awkwardly down at her paws and sighed. "No, she's still missing...But I...I have this...*feeling* that she's all right."

Sympathy gleamed in Loki's eyes. "I'm sure she is."

Saderia just sighed and turned back to her work, her eyes clouded. "Thanks, Loki." She hesitated, then glanced around surreptitiously to see if they could be overheard. Lowering her voice, she leaned closer and hissed

in Loki's ear. "Hey, can you keep a secret?" A dumb question. Loki would always keep her secrets.

Loki blinked in surprise, then shrugged. "Sure. What's up?"

Saderia hesitated and glanced uncomfortably over her shoulders, then heaved a sigh and dropped her guard, deciding to confide in her friend. "I'm thinking about leaving to look for my mother once the week is up. I'm going to take my friends and just go."

Loki's eyes widened in surprise. "You're going to leave the forest?"

Saderia nodded darkly, a grave shadow flitting across her face. "Yes. My Mom's obviously not here, so she has to be somewhere out there."

Loki frowned anxiously. "Isn't it dangerous out there? You think you'll be okay?"

Saderia let out a sigh. "I think so. I mean, I've traveled plenty of times before, so it will probably be easier this time." She paused, then glanced uncomfortably at her paws. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know that if I go missing, I'll be okay."

Loki nodded slowly. "All right. Thanks for telling me. And don't worry." A wry smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I won't tell anyone."

A glimmer of gratitude and relief lit up Saderia's eyes. "Thanks."

Loki firmly held up a paw. "Wait. Don't thank me yet. First, I want to know how I can be sure that you'll be safe. If you want to go running off into the wild world out there, well, that's your business, but if you want me to keep this a secret, I want to make sure you're not just going to get hurt or killed. I don't need that on my conscience. So what do you have that will keep you safe and therefore keep my mouth shut?"

A faint smile crossed Saderia's face. "Loki, you know I can't promise you anything. But I have been on many journeys in the past and I survived then. When we leave, we're probably going to start in the desert, and Dingo's going to lead us. He knows the desert inside and out, so we won't get lost. If we ever find ourselves in danger, we have our ways of getting out of it. Jeb scares others, so he can give us an advantage, and Dingo, Dash, and I all know how to fight. More than anything, though, I'm determined not to give up until I find my mother, no matter what gets in my way."

Loki studied her carefully. After a moment of silence, a knowing smile spread across her face. "All right. I'll trust you to keep yourself and your friends safe. You better be careful, too, or I'll come after you and give you a piece of my mind. Understand?"

Saderia grinned and nodded gratefully. "Understood."

"Good." Loki flicked her playfully with her tail, her green eyes gleaming. "I know you and your friends can fight, and I know you know your way around a sticky situation. Of all the reasons you gave me, though...the one about your mother was the one that won me over." Giving her a wry smile, Loki winked, then turned back to her work. "Drop me a line before you leave. And good luck on your journey. Your secret is safe with me."

Relief shone on Saderia's face. "Thanks, Loki. I will, I promise. And thanks for keeping this journey a secret."

Loki's eyes twinkled with playfulness and a mischievous grin crossed her face. "What journey? I know nothing of the sort."

"So what happened?" Jeb looked up curiously when Saderia, Dash, and Dingo stepped off the dirt path and crept into the wide, sunlit clearing surrounding Saderia's house. The tiny creature gazed up at them with wide bicolor eyes as they stepped closer to him. "Was everyone...okay?"

Saderia nodded with a weak smile and sat back in front of him, her fur dappled with dying sunlight. "Yeah, everything was great! Everyone's doing well." Glancing past him, she peered at the broken house at the back of the clearing and felt a jolt of surprise race through her when she realized that a few of the cracks in the wall had been filled. Clearly, her family had made good progress on the house while she had been gone. "Things look good here. How did it go?"

Jeb shrugged and glanced absently back at the house. "Good. Your family got a lot done. I mostly just passed things up to them when they were on the roof."

Saderia smiled warmly. "Well, that definitely saved them time. Good job, Jeb."

Jeb's eyes lit up with pride and a bright smile spread across his face. "Thanks."

Saderia grinned and gave him a warm nod, then glanced back at Dash and Dingo. "You two can fill Jeb in on what happened at the Home of the Leopards. I'm going to go talk to my Dad and see if there's anything we can do to help. I'll be right back."

When her friends nodded in response, she quickly stepped past them into the clearing, leaving them behind to talk. Quickly, she padded across the grassy ground in the direction of the house, spotting her father in front of the door. Makero stood just in front of the front door, studying the house with cool, thoughtful green eyes. A few feet away, Cia and Uncle Jash studied one of the cracks in the wall, debating how to fix it.

Quickening her pace, Saderia bounded toward her father and opened her mouth to call out to him. Before she could speak, Makero glanced back and spotted her out of the corner of his eye. His dark green irises flashed and he abruptly turned around to face her.

"Saderia." Makero narrowed his eyes and met her gaze with a grave, serious stare.

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise as she skidded to a halt in front of him. Frowning, she tipped her head to the side in confusion and felt a wave of worry wash over her at the sight of his shadowed, concerned face. "Dad? What's wrong?"

Makero heaved a sigh and flattened his ears. "Nothing. What did you want?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then shrugged. "I was just wondering if there was anything my friends and I could do to work on the house before we call it a night."

A sad smile tugged at the corners of Makero's mouth, but it didn't meet his eyes. "That's very thoughtful of you, Saderia, but I think you should rest today." He paused, then narrowed his eyes darkly, a shadow flitting across his face. "Let's not beat around the bush, though, Saderia. I know why you've been so desperate to finish this work, and I know why you constantly talk to your friends in hushed voices." His green eyes flashed in the dimming light of the afternoon. "I know you're planning on running away."

Chapter Seven

Hillcrest Rock

Silence fell over the clearing. Saderia blinked several times and opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. What exactly was she supposed to say? Her father's dark green eyes bored into her, making her fur prickle with discomfort. Biting her lip, Saderia looked away to avoid his gaze, her ears flattening tensely. Neither of them spoke for what felt like hours. The tension was so thick, it was hard to breathe.

Clearing her throat, Saderia nervously flicked her tail and avoided his eyes, forcing herself to speak. "Um...what makes you think that?"

Makero heaved a sigh. "Saderia, I know you. I know what you're capable of."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then bristled and narrowed her eyes, feeling a wave of indignation wash over her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I know you're capable of running off into danger and getting yourself into trouble." Makero flattened his ears and gave her a dry glare. "Your record speaks for itself, Saderia. You're not exactly an expert at avoiding danger."

Saderia frowned. "I beg to differ. I might get into trouble, but I always get out of it, don't I?"

Makero's eyes flashed. "So you think you're invincible now? You managed to save yourself many times, but usually just by a hair."

Saderia gritted her teeth and started to snap back at him, then paused and forced herself to take a deep, calming breath. As evenly as possible, she met her father's gaze. "Of course I don't think I'm invincible. If anything, all the danger I've faced has taught me that I'm *not* and that I should be careful. All I'm asking for is a little credit. I might not be 'invincible,' but I do have experience with dangerous situations."

Makero sighed and gazed wearily down at his paws. "I know, Saderia, and I'm very proud of you. I know you can take care of yourself

and your friends. But I can't just let you run off. What kind of father would I be then?"

Saderia's gaze softened and she let out a sympathetic sigh. "This isn't about what kind of father you are. This is about what's best for my mother and for the forest."

Makero narrowed his eyes and angrily lashed his tail. "You can't just sacrifice yourself for the forest and your mother."

"I wasn't planning on it," Saderia replied, coolly flicking her tail. "Like I said, I've learned to be more careful. And I've got four friends that will help me."

"I guess, but..." Makero trailed off and blinked in surprise, then frowned in misunderstanding. "Wait, *four* friends? I thought you would only take Dash, Dingo, and Jeb. Who's the fourth one?"

Saderia froze, her heart skipping a beat and her eyes widening in alarm. "Oh, uh...nothing. No one. I just...I just meant that there are four of *us* and not that I have...four friends...I guess I just mixed up my words..." She trailed off nervously, uncomfortably aware of the fact that she had just slipped up and almost mentioned Claw. How her father would react to her seeing ghosts, she didn't know, but considering how worked up he was already, she wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

Makero frowned and studied her intently, a confused, questioning expression on his face. After several tense moments of silence, he blinked in surprise and gaped at her in disbelief. "You're not planning on taking *Loki*, are you?"

Saderia blinked in shock, then quickly shook her head. "No, of course not! Loki's perfectly happy staying home. I wouldn't want to drag her out into the world with us. She might be adventurous, but she would be miserable out there. I wouldn't want to take her away from her family and her home. The Home of the Leopards is where she belongs."

Makero nodded slowly, seeming to relax. "Well, good. I understand. You don't want to take her into danger."

Saderia shifted nervously, having a bad feeling of where this was going. "Yeah..."

The King narrowed his eyes and coolly flicked his tail. "So if you have a problem taking her, why don't you have a problem taking Dash, Dingo, and Jeb?"

Saderia looked away and shrugged, her eyes clouding. “They have more...experience with this kind of thing. I mean, they all kind of got pulled into these adventures, so they’re more used to it. Besides, the four of us are a team. Loki’s my friend, too, but she’s a more casual friend who has her own posse with Lisa. Dash, Dingo, Jeb, and I understand each other and we have each other’s backs. I wouldn’t do anything without them. Besides, they’re all part of the prophecy.”

Her father blinked in surprise. “All of them? I thought it was only Dash.”

Saderia shook her head, her amber eyes glowing with certainty. “No, it’s all of them. I just know it is. I can feel it.” Pausing, she narrowed her eyes and faced her father sternly. “But that’s not what really matters here.”

Makero nodded slowly, his eyes clouding with thought. “The prophecy still has a lot to do with your life, I see.”

Saderia shrugged nonchalantly. “Mom told me a long time ago that I’m apparently going to be fulfilling it all my life. I decided to stop hating it so much a while back. Since then, it *has* had a lot to do with my life.”

“I see that.” The King studied her closely, then narrowed his eyes in a stern glare. “You’re right, though. That’s not what matters. What matters is that I can’t let you leave.”

Saderia flattened her ears indignantly. “Why not? I guess it wouldn’t really hurt to tell you now that I’ve got it all planned out. I know what I’m doing.”

“Oh, really?” He raised an eyebrow skeptically. “Just what have you planned out?”

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, I know where we’re going to start. As we get closer to...the day we’re going to leave, I’m going to plan out how much food we should take and how we should ration it. I’ll plan out approximately how much time we should spend looking for Mom in the desert, Jeb’s forest, and any other place we find. The desert is where we’ll start out. That’s all I have for now, but I think it’s a good start that will get us through the journey safely.”

Makero heaved a sigh. “Not good enough.”

Saderia’s fur bristled in exasperation. “Well, what exactly do you want?”

“I want a promise that you’ll be safe,” Makero growled, his green eyes flashing and his ears flattening in a cold glare. “But you can never promise that.”

“Then your expectations need to be lowered.” Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Listen, Dad...Dingo knows the desert inside and out. Jeb knows his forest just as well. I’ve been through those places so much *I* know them by heart. And if Mom’s not in either of those places and we have to look somewhere else, then we’ll be as careful as we can be. But that’s not all I have to keep me safe. I have my Dreams. And even though they’re hard to figure out, they can give me a clear warning if I’m in danger. And...well, I also have another ‘secret weapon’ that I haven’t told you about.”

The King frowned in bewilderment. “Like what?”

Saderia shrugged uncomfortably and glanced down at her paws, her amber eyes glowing with anxiousness and unease. “Well...I...I can talk to ghosts.”

Silence. Makero blinked in shock and stared at her in disbelief. His mouth gaped open, but no words came out. A tense silence stretched out between them as Makero struggled for words. Blinking rapidly, the King gaped at her in bewilderment and shook his head in shock. “*What?*”

Saderia heaved a weary sigh. “Dad, I know it sounds crazy, but... well, if I can see the future, why is it so hard to believe that I can talk to ghosts?”

Makero blinked several times, his eyes wide with disbelief. “Because they’re *dead*.”

Saderia shuffled her paws and shrugged awkwardly. “Well...Yeah, I guess they are, but I can still talk to them. In Dreams.” She paused, then frowned curiously. “Could Mom talk to ghosts? I know the ability to talk to them stems from my Dream sense.”

Makero blinked in shock. “It does?” He frowned uncertainly, then slowly shook his head. “No, your Mom never told me anything like that.”

“Well, that’s what I came to understand,” Saderia replied, lightly flicking her tail. “My Dream sense is the reason I’m able to talk to them.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes firmly. “I’m *not* making this up. I really can see ghosts in Dreams and talk to them.”

Makero wrinkled his nose in bewilderment, struggling to understand. “Do you, like, *summon* them or something?”

Saderia shrugged. “Sometimes I can ask them to come visit me right before I go to sleep, but for the most part, it’s up to them whether they talk to me or not.”

Makero frowned and sharply flicked his tail. “Whose *ghost* do you talk to?”

Saderia hesitated and glanced uncomfortably at her paws, her expression softening and her voice growing quieter. “Her name’s Claw. She’s a dingo. She’s Dingo’s sister.”

Makero blinked in surprise, then slowly looked down at his paws. “Oh,” he murmured, his voice softening and his expression slowly losing its shock. He paused, then looked up uncertainly, a curious frown on his face. “Does...Does Dingo know?”

Saderia smiled faintly. “Yeah, he knows. He was really freaked out at first, but he knows I wouldn’t lie about something like this. He’s fine with it now.”

Makero took a deep breath and let it out slowly, a vague, soft look of seriousness and understanding spreading across his face. “Right. I guess you wouldn’t lie about something like this.” He paused, then looked up curiously. “So how long has this whole talking to ghosts thing been going on?”

Saderia shrugged. “I first saw Claw in the desert. I didn’t talk to her for a while after that, but I spoke to her right before my friends and I left to look for you back in Jeb’s forest. She helped guide us, told us what to look out for, and kept us out of danger.”

“So that’s why she’s a...‘secret weapon’?” Makero gave her a bewildered, wondering frown. “She tells you what to look out for?”

“She doesn’t tell me everything,” Saderia cautioned, giving him a calm, serious look. “But she does tell me enough to keep me out of danger. Like when I left Jeb’s forest to find you. There were actually huge groups of dingoes waiting for us right outside the forest, but Claw told me they were there and showed me how to sneak out of the forest without getting caught by them. Which, in retrospect, probably saved my life.”

Makero’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

She nodded firmly, her amber eyes glowing. “Yes. There are a lot of animals looking out for me, Dad.”

Makero narrowed his eyes and frowned, a gleam of desperation flickering into his green irises. “Well...if you’re really determined to go, then why don’t I just join you?”

Saderia heaved a heavy sigh. “You know why, Dad. You’re the King of the forest. What’s the kingdom going to think if all the royalty go missing like Mom did? The forest animals still need you to lead them and take care of them.”

“Well, you’re the Princess of the forest,” Makero growled, a challenging gleam in his eyes. “They need you, too.”

“Yes, but that’s why it’s so great that there are so many of us to look after the forest,” Saderia murmured, a faint smile crossing her face. “You and Cia and Uncle Jash are perfectly capable of looking after the kingdom, while Dash and I go looking for Mom with our friends. Think of it as royal business, rather than me running away.”

Makero lashed his tail in frustration. “Whether this is ‘royal business’ or whatever you want to call it, you’re still young, and you shouldn’t have to do these kinds of things. It’s not your job to look after the forest all the time, at least not right now.”

“Well, if I keep that attitude, I won’t exactly be a great Queen later on, will I?” Saderia countered, narrowing her eyes indignantly. “Just because I’m young doesn’t mean I can’t help. Listen. The kingdom needs Mom like they need you. It’s my responsibility as Princess to bring her back, for them as well as for her and for us.”

“You didn’t *choose* to be Princess,” Makero retorted, his green eyes gleaming with desperation and defeat. “You shouldn’t have to feel responsible for everyone...”

Saderia flattened her ears. “Look, I might not have asked for this job, but I have it and I have to take responsibility. I don’t have a choice. Mom would have wanted me to look after the kingdom, and the best way for me to do that now is to bring back its Queen. That’s my job. Your job is to stay here and look after the kingdom. Dad, I hate for it to come to this, but...I’m leaving. I have to. Nothing you say will convince me otherwise.”

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia met her father’s gaze unwaveringly, refusing to back down. Seeing the pained, desperate gleam in Makero’s

green eyes made her heart ache. Deep down, though, she knew she had to stand her ground. With her friends, her Dreams, her spirit guide, and her knowledge of the world, she was the only one who could bring Karenisha back. Anyone else would just get lost. What Makero didn't seem to understand was that Karenisha desperately needed to be found. He probably pictured her as the brave Queen who could survive easily while he formed his own plan to save her—he hadn't seen how weak she had been in the last days before she had left. Considering what state she was in, Karenisha needed to be found *fast* and if anyone could find her quickly, it was Saderia. Maybe deep down, Makero knew that. She just had to get him to admit it.

Makero narrowed his eyes and stared at her for a long moment, his eyes darkening. His gaze hardened and a grave, stubborn expression crept across his face. "I'm going to watch you," he growled, abandoning his futile attempts to argue with her. "I'm going to make sure you don't run away."

Saderia heaved a weary sigh. "That isn't necessary."

"Oh, yes it is." His eyes flashed and he started to turn away, coolly lashing his tail.

Frustration boiled in Saderia's chest. "So what now? If you're not going to let me look for Mom, what are you going to do? Send some other animals without foreign friends, spirit guides, and Dreams to go get themselves killed trying to find her?"

"Let me figure that out," he called, lashing his tail and refusing to look back.

Her eyes flashed with annoyance and anger. "I'm the only one in this forest that even has a chance of finding Mom and you know it!" she shouted, flattening her ears. "You don't need to be like this!"

Makero coolly flicked his tail. "I'll decide how I need to be." He started to pad toward the house, then paused and slowly turned back to face her, a dark, guarded expression on his face. "Actually, on second thought, I think I'll work on the inside of the house today. Send Dash to help me. And if he's not there in five minutes, I'm going to assume you've already left and I will not be happy. Understand?"

Saderia glared at him for a long moment, then heaved a defeated sigh and turned to walk away. "Fine, I'll tell Dash to find you." She paused, then glanced back over her shoulder with a dull, cool gaze. "Oh, by the way,

I wanted to go to the Home of the Leopards tomorrow. I wanted to see Loki and help out some more.”

Makero narrowed his eyes and frowned, lashing his tail. “Absolutely not...”

“Relax,” she interrupted, giving him a dry glare and rolling her eyes. “I’ll only take Dash. Dingo and Jeb can stay behind. That way, you’ll know I’m not going to leave.”

Makero hesitated, then nodded curtly. “Fine. I’ll make sure to keep an eye on them while you’re gone.”

“You do that,” Saderia muttered, trying to bite back a sigh. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go get Dash.”

Letting out a long sigh, she whipped around and stalked away from Makero, ignoring his lingering stare. Behind her, her father watched her for a long moment, then reluctantly turned and padded back toward the house. With a roll of her eyes, Saderia stormed across the grassy clearing in the direction of her friends. Dash, Dingo, and Jeb looked up in surprise when she stalked over to them, their eyes wide with shock.

Dash rose to his paws and stepped closer to her, his eyes narrowed with worry. “Saderia? What happened? That was some argument.”

Saderia let out a long breath and sat back tiredly, her amber eyes weary with defeat. “It was just an argument, Dash. Don’t worry. I’ve got it all under control. Oh, but Dad wants you to help him with the inside of the house...Just you.” Flattening her ears, she glanced back at the house and rolled her eyes. “You should probably go see him now before he throws a fit. I’ll fill you in on the argument later, I promise.”

Dash frowned and glanced curiously at the house, then faced Saderia with bewildered amber eyes. After a long moment of hesitation, he pressed his tail gently against her shoulder and reluctantly rose to his paws. “All right...” Giving her a lingering, curious gaze, Dash slowly started to back away, then turned and bounded toward the house. The dark lion cast a concerned glance over his shoulder as he darted across the clearing. When he reached the front door, he hesitated and watched her worriedly for a long moment before reluctantly turning and disappearing inside the house.

The second he vanished, Saderia sighed and put a paw to her forehead, her eyes weary. Dingo and Jeb watched her silently, their eyes gleaming with wonder and concern.

“Saderia?” Jeb looked up at her with nervous, worried blue/green eyes. “Are you okay? I’ve never seen you fight with your family like that.”

She looked away, a guilty gleam in her eyes. “I know. I’m sorry you two had to see that.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes nervously and glanced up at Dingo, a dark, guilty look on her face. “Do you think I’m a bad daughter? For fighting with my Dad?”

Dingo raised an eyebrow, then let out a soft chuckle. “Family is meant to fight,” he replied, giving her a wry, knowing smile. “So no, I don’t think you’re a bad daughter.”

She managed a weak smile. “Thanks.”

“Yes, Dad, I promise I won’t run away while I’m gone.” Saderia rolled her eyes in exasperation and gave her father an annoyed glare. The tiger Princess stood on the edge of the dirt path, facing her father and the clearing behind him. Dash stood close beside her, shaded by the bright green trees rising up on either side of the path. A few paces away, Dingo and Jeb sat in the grassy clearing to watch their exchange, having already agreed to stay behind while Saderia and Dash traveled to the Home of the Leopards.

Already, it seemed like Saderia had been standing there for hours, waiting for Makero to let her go. The King had spent the past ten minutes questioning her and making sure she would be ‘safe.’ That was the word he used anyway. What he really wanted was to make sure she wouldn’t run away. At her wits end, she gave her father a dry glare. “I’m not going to leave, Dad. Stop being so paranoid.”

Her father shot her an irritated glance, then simply heaved a sigh. “Fine,” he muttered, his voice weary. “Dash, take care of her while you’re gone.”

Dash nodded nervously. “I...I will, Makero. I’ll, er, take care of her and make sure she doesn’t do anything dumb.”

Saderia decided to let that one go, for his sake.

“All right.” Makero took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ll see you two later then.” The King studied them for a long moment, a dark, fearful gleam in his green eyes. Turning away, he started to stalk back toward the house, his tail dragging on the ground. Soon, he disappeared into the den, leaving Saderia alone with her friends.

Dash frowned, a worried gleam in his eyes. "Is he going to be okay?"

Dingo glanced at the place where Makero had disappeared and shrugged, his light brown eyes untroubled. "He'll be fine. I'll keep an eye on him while you're gone. I'll even talk to him if you want."

Saderia quickly shook her head. "You don't have to do that. You don't have to get involved."

Dingo calmly flicked his tail. "Why not? I don't mind butting in where I don't belong. Don't worry, though. I won't upset him. At least, I'll try not to."

She put a paw to her forehead and tried to hide a grin. "Okay. Thanks, I guess."

Dingo grinned. "See you later, guys. Give my regards to that friend of yours."

"Sure." Saderia gave him a warm smile. "Bye, Dingo. Bye, Jeb."

"Goodbye, Saderia." Dingo nodded to her, then turned and started to walk toward the house, guiding Jeb away with a flick of his tail.

Smiling, Saderia watched them pad away, then turned around to face the worn dirt path behind her, her eyes lighting up and glowing with hope. With a quick flick of her tail, she signaled for Dash to follow her, then lunged onto the path and bounded along the dirty road, letting the rustling trees swallow her up and hide the clearing behind her.

Dash looked up curiously as they crept along the path. "So when *are* we leaving?"

Saderia raised an eyebrow. "You sound almost eager to leave."

Dash rolled his eyes. "Not really. I just know that you want to leave soon. Besides, I can tell you feel kind of guilty about it, and you'll probably just keep feeling guilty until we finally leave. I don't want you to be stressed."

Saderia flicked him playfully with her tail. "You know me too well."

Dash grinned, his eyes sparkling in the shade of the towering trees on either side of the path. "I guess I do." He paused, then frowned curiously. "Hey, have you had any more Dreams? Or spoken to Claw?"

Saderia shook her head. "No, not yet. I'm waiting for Claw to give me the word to leave. I'm sure she'll come to me when the time comes."

"I hope so," Dash replied, letting out a long, weary sigh.

Saderia frowned and shot him a questioning glance. “You don’t trust Claw.”

Dash shrugged and looked away, his eyes shadowed. “Well, she never once talked to you back in Jeb’s forest when you needed her...”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “I thought I explained that to you...”

Dash heaved a sigh and turned back to face her, his amber eyes apologetic. “You did. I’m sorry. I know she had her, er, reasons. And I know she does help. I just worried about you so much back then and...well...”

Saderia raised an eyebrow. “That was so long ago, Dash. I never thought you were one to hold grudges.”

He shrugged uncomfortably. “Normally I’m not.”

Saderia just sighed and turned around to keep walking. “She did what she thought was best. I don’t really think she did anything wrong.”

“Okay.” Dash abruptly turned to face forward, his tail flicking distressfully back and forth. “I’m not trying to start something, Saderia. I’m just...never mind.”

Saderia let out a soft breath and gave him a weak smile. “It’s okay. I get it. But I *do* trust her, and you at least trust my judgment, right?”

“Of course.” He faced her with a serious expression, then gave her a faint smile. “Now come on. There’s been enough arguing around here lately. Let’s go see Loki.”

“It’s about time you got here!” Loki raced toward Saderia and Dash in a blur of spotted yellow fur the instant they stepped off the beaten path into the dusty clearing of the Home of the Leopards. The cheetah/leopard skidded to a halt right in front of them, a bright smile on her face and a brilliant gleam in her shining green eyes.

Saderia grinned. “Hi, Loki. Sorry for the holdup.”

Loki flicked her tail, as if waving away her apologies. “Aw, I’m just kidding. I’m glad you’re here and not miles away roughing it out in the desert.”

Saderia and Dash exchanged a dark, knowing glance and uncomfortably looked away.

Catching their shared glance, Loki frowned in confusion. “What? I’m just messing with you, you know. Is something wrong?”

Saderia heaved a weary sigh. “No, Loki, we’re fine. I know you’re just playing. There’s just some stuff going on at home.”

“Ah, so your Dad’s onto you, huh?” Loki’s eyes glowed knowingly and she shot Saderia a sympathetic glance. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” She managed a weak smile. “Really, I’ve got everything under control.”

The cheetah shrugged. “I’ll take your word for it. Anyway, since you’re here, can I ask you a favor? I mean, I know you want to help and everything, but I’ve been working nonstop for the past eight hours and I’m exhausted. I just asked Maeta if I could take a break and she said it was fine. So can we just hang out and take a break for a while?”

Saderia smiled warmly. “Sure. That would be fine.”

“Great.” Loki grinned, her eyes glowing with anticipation. “I was thinking of going to Hillcrest Rock. You know, that huge boulder in Twisted Creek Woods? I’ve been dying to see what the woods looks like, but I haven’t had time to check. It would just be the three of us. Lisa’s working right now, so she won’t be able to join us. It should be fun, though.” She paused, then frowned uncertainly. “Although, if you don’t want to go in the woods, that’s fine, considering that, well, you two almost died there...” The cheetah trailed off and rolled her eyes. “Okay, that came out weird, but you know what I mean. If that place still has bad vibes for you and you just want to stay put, that’s fine.”

Saderia laughed. “No, Loki, it’s fine. It does have some...memories, but I want to see the woods, too. Besides, I don’t think I ever *did* get to see Hillcrest Rock.”

Loki grinned. “Good. Let’s get going then.” Flicking her tail, the cheetah/leopard turned around and padded across the dusty clearing, signaling for Saderia and Dash to follow. With a faint smile, Saderia followed her friend to the outskirts of the Home of the Leopards’ clearing where the dirty, sparsely grassed clearing met with the wild, overgrown grasses of Twisted Creek Woods. A wall of trees lined the edges of the neighborhood and seemed to shelter the rest of the woods behind it.

Casting a quick glance over her shoulder, Loki darted into the thick undergrowth lining the clearing outskirts. Saderia and Dash quickly dove into the bushes after her and wriggled their way through the thick fronds until they reached the other side. One by one, they stepped out onto the soft

grass and gazed at the tall trees and wild undergrowth of Twisted Creek Woods. A shiver raced down Saderia's spine. Despite its peaceful appearance, the woods still held bad memories. Shaking off the uneasy feeling, she followed Loki past a clump of tall trees and crept into the woods. As she moved deeper into the dark woods, though, she found herself walking closer to Dash. Just in case.

The woods opened up around her as she walked deeper into the forest. The strong, leaf-laden tree branches rustled lightly on a cool breeze. Autumn-colored leaves and twigs covered the ground. The overgrown grass reached high enough to tickle their bellies and a fresh, revitalizing scent floated through the air. If Saderia listened closely, she could hear the soft rustling and squeaking sounds of tiny woods animals like mice, squirrels, and birds. Several minutes passed by as the three of them crept deeper into the woods, weaving around thick oak trees and pushing past dense undergrowth. Following Loki, Saderia wound around a wide oak tree with Dash close beside her, then stopped when Loki paused in front of her.

The cheetah's eyes glowed and she sat back to gaze up at what lay in front of her with a brilliant smile. "We're here," she called, giving her friends a playful smile.

Saderia blinked in surprise, then looked up at what Loki had seen and gasped.

Hillcrest Rock was said to be large enough to reveal a good part of the forest to anyone who climbed to the top, but she hadn't realized just how *big* it really was. An enormous rock formation sat in front of her, towering alongside the low branches of the tallest trees. Several craggy brown rocks lay stacked one on top of the other, forming the enormous boulder. At the top, a long, thick platform sat propped up on the other rocks, the very end of it hanging out over open air, reaching out toward the tops of the trees and towering over the grass. Trees shrouded the mountain-like stone and thick brush cropped up all around it, hiding it and forming a cozy nook in the middle of the forest. A craggy, worn-down rock trail wound down from the very top of the rock to the bottom.

Loki shot them a haughty/friendly grin. "Well? You coming?"

A bright smile crossed Saderia's face. "You bet!"

The cheetah grinned and flicked her tail to signal for them to follow. Chuckling to herself, she raced toward the rock in a blur of yellow spots,

leaving Saderia and Dash racing to catch up. Smiling, Saderia darted toward the enormous boulder with Dash close behind her and leapt onto the craggy trail. The rocky trail led her up the side of the huge stone. Moving quickly, Saderia followed the path as carefully as possible, leaping over large cracks in the stone and climbing over small rocks. After a few minutes of climbing, she stepped out onto the enormous platform at the top of the rock with Dash close behind her. Loki stood on the very edge of the rock, gazing out at the forest with shining eyes. Slowly, Saderia and Dash crept up on either side of her and let out a gasp.

An amazing view spread out before them. Millions of treetops dotted the land in front of them like a giant sea of green. From the tallest point of the rock, Saderia could make out the dusty Home of the Leopards' clearing. When she craned her neck, she could see even farther. The familiar town close to her home sat cradled in a clump of dense woods. Beyond it, she could even make out her house. Cool wind rustled her fur as she gazed at the awe-inspiring sight. Only the clouds seemed higher up there.

"Oh, wow!" Loki gazed out at the awesome sight with shining green eyes and shook her head in amazement. "I have *got* to get Lisa up here. She would love it!"

Saderia beamed. "This is amazing, Loki! Thanks for taking us up here!"

The cheetah chuckled and flicked her playfully with her tail. "No problem."

Laughing, Saderia flicked her back and grinned. When Loki smiled in response, Saderia beamed and glanced at the dark lion beside her. "What do you think, Dash? Isn't this awesome?"

Dash didn't seem to hear her. The dark lion didn't smile or laugh along with them. Blinking in surprise, Saderia turned around to face him and felt a jolt of shock shoot through her. Dash's eyes were focused intently on something far off in the distance, but it wasn't awe that shone in his amber irises. An expression of grave seriousness and something that looked like fear crossed his face. The dark lion hardly seemed to breathe.

"Dash?" Saderia frowned and studied him closely, a glimmer of worry in her eyes. "Dash, what's wrong? What are you looking at?"

Loki looked back in confusion, her green eyes narrowing. “What’s going on?”

Saderia flattened her ears nervously and shook her head in bewilderment, but never took her eyes off Dash. The dark lion stared off into space for what seemed like hours, then suddenly blinked. Seeming to wake up from some sort of daze, he shook himself, then looked up at her blankly.

“Dash?” Saderia narrowed her eyes uncertainly. “Is...something wrong?”

Dash blinked several times, as if not comprehending, then turned and slowly gazed out at the forest. His eyes locked on something in the distance and a dark shadow crossed his face. When Saderia tried to follow his gaze, she couldn’t tell what he was looking at. All she could see were peaceful treetops and sleepy clearings.

Looking down at his paws, Dash let out a soft breath and shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong,” he muttered. “I’m...fine.” Even as he spoke, though, his eyes drifted back toward the same spot he had been staring at before.

Saderia frowned and studied him curiously. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Dash stared out at the woods for a moment longer, then reluctantly tore his eyes off it and absently studied his paws. “This was, uh, really cool, Loki. Thanks for bringing us here.”

Loki raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. “No problem, I guess.” She paused, then glanced thoughtfully back at the rocky incline that had led them to the top. “We should probably get back, if that’s okay with you two. Eventually, I have to get back to work.”

“That’s fine,” Saderia murmured, her eyes never straying from Dash’s dazed face. Her friend avoided her gaze and kept his eyes trained on his paws. Frowning, Saderia shook herself and glanced back at Loki. “We’re coming. Come on, Dash,” she added, flicking him with her tail. “We have to go now.”

Still dazed, Dash slowly rose to his paws and started to follow, saying nothing.

Saderia watched him for a moment longer with a mystified expression before tearing her gaze off him and turning to follow Loki.

Focused on climbing safely down the rocky trail, Saderia didn't see Dash pause behind her and look back out at the forest.

The dark lion stopped at the top of the incline and gazed back in the direction he had looked before, a shadow flitting across his face. Confusion gleamed in his amber eyes and his face was a mask of unease. A strange sense of nervousness burned in his heart, a feeling he didn't understand. Anxiously, he scanned the forest around him, but saw nothing. After a long moment of hesitation, he tore his eyes off the forest and reluctantly turned to follow Saderia and Loki. As he walked down the rocky trail, though, a dark sense of fear rose in his chest, stronger and stronger with each step. He had seen something atop that platform. What it was and why he was so concerned about it, he didn't know. All he knew was that he had caught a fleeting glance of *something* far out in the forest. Something that made him very uneasy. Maybe it was an instinctual feeling he had acquired after spending so much time with Saderia. Maybe it was just nerves.

Whatever it was, though, he was sure he had seen *something* out there in the forest. Something bad. Something in his old clearing in the woods.

Chapter Eight

Dreams

“I hope Dad and the others have made as much progress as us.” Saderia cast a curious glance at Dash as the two padded along the dirt path that would lead them to Saderia’s house, barely noticing the blur of trees passing by on either side.

Dash shrugged vaguely, barely seeming to hear her. “I hope so, too...”

Saderia frowned and studied him intently. The dark lion had been acting that way—vague, dazed, and distracted—ever since they had stood on Hillcrest Rock. The fact that he hadn’t yet snapped out of it worried her, but she wasn’t exactly sure what she could do about it. Tearing her eyes off Dash, she gazed thoughtfully up at the sky through the canopy of leaves. The moon was slowly rising and stars had started to shimmer in the darkening sky, casting silvery light down on the path. A few minutes remained before nighttime fell. Hopefully, it would be enough time for her to get home before her father got worried.

She and Dash had left the Home of the Leopards just a few minutes ago. After helping the leopards work on their houses for most of the day, Saderia’s muscles felt weak with exhaustion, but she was happy with their progress. The leopards’ clearing looked better than ever and was well on its way to being fully repaired. If that was true of the worst neighborhood in the forest, it must be true of the other neighborhoods, as well. The thought sent a jolt of excitement racing through her. If everything in the forest was on its way to recovery, she could leave. Vaguely, she made a mental note to travel through the forest to check on the other neighborhoods later on to make sure she was correct.

Even as her heart fluttered at the thought of leaving, though, a dark sense of fear swept over her. Leaving her home was never easy and saying goodbye to her forest so soon after getting it back seemed even harder. Part of her wanted to stay a little longer to enjoy being back, but she would

hardly enjoy it. Every minute would be filled with worry for her mother. No, she had to find her mother first. Only then would she truly be able to enjoy being home. A heavy sigh escaped her chest and her tail drooped with sorrow.

Instantly, Dash looked up at her, tearing himself out of his daze. Concern filled his eyes, pushing away the clouded look that had haunted him. "Saderia? Are you okay?"

Saderia looked up in surprise, then rolled her eyes. "You've been out of it all day and now, when I just sigh, you're suddenly back to normal?"

Dash's face grew hot with embarrassment. "Uh...sorry about that. I don't know what came over me. There was just stuff on my mind, I guess."

Saderia raised an eyebrow, then just shrugged. "All right. I guess I can understand that. There's stuff on my mind, too."

Dash nodded, a knowing gleam in his eyes. "We're leaving soon, aren't we?"

"Yep." She let out a weary sigh. "I'm just waiting for Claw to give me the word."

Dash narrowed his eyes skeptically, but merely shrugged. "Okay."

Saderia started to say something, then froze. Something in the woods to her left caught her eye, making her freeze in place and whirl around in surprise. Blinking rapidly, she stared into the woods and frowned. "Wait a minute. I think I just saw something."

Dash blinked in surprise. "You too?"

Confusion colored Saderia's eyes. "What?"

Dash quickly looked away and shuffled his paws. "Uh...nothing."

Frowning, Saderia studied him wonderingly for a long moment, then slowly turned back around to face the woods. After a long moment of hesitation, she narrowed her eyes and took a step toward the edge of the path. Ducking past a clump of undergrowth, she crept into the dark woods on the side of the path with Dash close behind her. Carefully, she wove around a few thick oak trees and crept silently through the shadowed undergrowth with a soft rustle of leaves, then paused beside a tall, ancient-looking tree and blinked in shock.

Dingo sat a few paces in front of her, his back turned to her and his eyes focused on something far off in the woods. Dark, shadowy undergrowth rose up all around him and low-hanging tree branches hung

down over his head, hiding him in the dense leaves and shrouding him in thick darkness. Never once did he move or speak. The soft chirping of crickets was the only sound in the dark woods. Frowning in confusion, Saderia paused and watched him closely, her eyes clouded with bewilderment. The desert canine didn't seem to realize she was there. A soft, weary sigh escaped his throat and a dull, forlorn look clouded his light brown eyes. Dingo's shaggy brown fur was as unkempt as usual—coarse and sticking out at all angles—but tonight it seemed to make him look even skinnier than usual. His shoulders slumped and his ears drooped as he stared out at something she couldn't see.

“Dingo?” Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion. “What are you doing out here?”

Dingo jumped at the sound of her voice and whipped around, his eyes wide with shock. Seeing her stunned look, he blinked in surprise, then slowly sat back and let out a soft, calming breath. “Saderia...Dash...Er, hi.” He paused, then sheepishly flicked his tail. “Your Dad sent me to wait for you and bring you home, but I got...sidetracked...”

Saderia frowned in bewilderment. “Sidetracked? What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Dingo muttered, avoiding her eyes. “I just got bored with waiting for you guys on that path, so I wandered around for a while.”

Her eyes clouded with confusion. “Anything special about this particular spot?”

He heaved a sigh. “No, not really. It's just...if I look hard enough, I think I can see the desert. Or maybe it's just my imagination.” He shrugged and looked uncomfortably away, his eyes shadowed and clouded. “Either way, it doesn't matter. We should go.”

Dingo started to get up to leave, but Saderia quickly held out a paw to stop him. “The desert?” A concerned frown crossed her face. “Dingo...do you miss the desert?”

Dingo blinked in surprise, then snorted and looked away, a shadow darkening his face. Rolling his eyes, he let out a bitter laugh and shook his head in disdain. “Isn't that bizarre? I miss a place that almost killed me.” Flicking his tail, he rose to his paws, not looking at Saderia. “Whatever. You already know I have issues. Let's just go home.”

“Wait.” She rested her tail gently on his shoulder to stop him. “It’s okay to miss your old home. I mean, Dash and I were *extremely* homesick when we left our forest.”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, your forest wasn’t a deathtrap either.”

“Actually, it kind of was when we left it.” Her gaze softened with sympathy. “The desert’s still your original home. It’s all right to miss it, even if it seems strange. I get it.”

Dingo sighed and looked away, his light brown eyes clouded. “Thanks,” he muttered. “I don’t even know why I miss it. Probably because Claw was there. Or something stupid like that.” He shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Like I said, I was just bored waiting for you guys, so now that you’re here, we should really get back.”

Saderia gave him a reassuring smile. “All right.” Rising to her paws, she flicked her tail to signal for him to follow her. When Dingo pushed himself to his paws and fell into step behind her, she padded back to the large tree where Dash stood watching them. The dark lion turned to follow her as she led the way through the darkening woods.

“So what happened while we were gone?” Saderia murmured, weaving around a tree.

Dingo shrugged absently. “Nothing much. I talked to your Dad.”

“Really?” Breaking out of the woods and stepping out onto the shadowed dirt path, she frowned curiously. “What did you say?”

He flicked his tail carelessly. “I said he was an idiot for trying to stop you from leaving.”

Saderia gaped at him in disbelief. “Dingo!”

“Well, I didn’t say it like *that*.” He rolled his eyes in exasperation. “I put it...nicer.”

“*You*?” Dash snorted and raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “How exactly do you tell someone they’re an idiot nicely?”

Dingo flicked his tail in annoyance. “You know what I mean.”

Saderia let out an exasperated sigh. “What exactly did you tell him, Dingo?”

Dingo shrugged. “Pretty much the same things you did. But, unlike you, I’m not family, so it was harder for him to argue with me. I just told him that you were good at surviving and that you know what you’re doing.

I also told him that if you were doing something as important as finding your mother, you wouldn't be careless because you wouldn't want to put her in danger or ruin your chances of saving her. I told him you love your Mom way too much to do anything stupid to jeopardize her safety."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then let a tiny smile creep across her face. "Thanks, Dingo. What did he say after that?"

Dingo flicked his tail lightly. "Not much. He just thanked me and Jeb for helping out, then asked me to go wait for you and bring you home."

Dash blinked in surprise. "He told you to come find us even though he's scared of us being together and running away?"

Dingo flicked his tail nonchalantly and nodded. "Yep."

A bright smile crept across Saderia's face. "Then you said something right."

The moon shone in the pitch black sky by the time Saderia, Dash, and Dingo reached the house. After seeing them safely home, Dingo left for his own den to call it a night. Jeb had already left a little while ago. Even though it was hard to make out through the dim light, the house seemed even better than before. More of the cracks had been filled in and a few of the holes in the roof were about half-way repaired. Outside the house, Makero stood with Cia and Uncle Jash close by. Flicking her tail at Dash, Saderia padded across the clearing and slowed down when she neared the front door to her house.

"Hey, Dad." She gave a cautious wave and stopped behind him. "We're back."

Makero glanced back and smiled sadly, hiding a dull look of worry. "I can see that." He paused, then glanced tiredly up at the sky. "It's getting kind of late, huh? How about we sleep in the house tonight? I've almost got the hole in your room repaired."

Saderia smiled and flicked him lightly with her tail. "All right. Thanks, Dad. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Saderia." Makero paused, then let out a soft sigh and looked down at his paws. "I know you'll figure out the right thing to do. And I'll just have to accept whatever you decide." He gave her a gentle flick of his tail and smiled faintly, then turned and ducked into the house

through the open door. His tail drooped and dragged across the floor in defeat, but he walked with a sense of quiet determination and resignation.

Saderia heaved a sigh as her father disappeared into the house. Pushing back a wave of guilt, she signaled for Dash to follow her and crept into the den. Silently, she slunk across the dirty floor into the hallway and followed it to her and Dash's rooms. Regret washed over her when she realized she and Dash wouldn't be sleeping next to each other anymore. Unlike when she was on one of her adventures, she wasn't in danger, but she still missed the comfort of having someone next to her, ready to help her. Trying to push the thought away, she said a quick goodnight and stepped into her shadowed room, leaving the door open a crack. She knew she should feel safe in her own home...

Even so, she was starting to look forward to leaving just a little bit more.

Two wispy figures appeared out of the darkness in a swirl of black. A dull, dark void surrounded both of them, leaving them suspended in nothingness. One of the wispy figures shone with a brilliant white light that sparkled from her light brown fur and glowed in her light brown eyes. The other figure was draped with shadows. Shrouded in darkness, all she could see of him was a faint, cruel sneer.

"You...I know you." The light figure's soft, stunned voice echoed in the darkness.

A low, cruel snicker sounded from the shadows. "You don't need to know who I am. As for the Princess and I...Let's just say, we have a rather interesting history."

All the fur on Saderia's back rose up in alarm. Before she could utter a word, darkness crashed over the scene and swept the translucent figures away. Blinding light shot through the blackness, stinging her eyes. Blinking rapidly, she opened her eyes and gazed out at the vision in front of her in shock. Sand covered the land all around her and an angry, burning sun hung heavily in the clear blue sky. Leagues of shadowed canine figures rose up around her, surrounding her on all sides. Fear rose in Saderia's chest, but the dingoes stayed deathly still. Not a single one made a move to attack. A low, bloodthirsty howl suddenly erupted from somewhere behind

her, making her whirl around in shock. Her eyes widened in horror at the new vision that greeted her.

The desert landscape was torn apart with vicious fighting. Earsplitting howls and snarls echoed through the blood-scented air, ringing in Saderia's ears. Hundreds of shadowy figures covered the bloody desert floor, locked in deadly embraces, each indistinguishable from the next. Shadows clashed all across the desert, lashing out with claws and wrestling each other to the ground. Horror gleamed in Saderia's eyes as she stared at the awful scene. She couldn't tell who was fighting who.

A low growl suddenly sounded close by her ear. Her eyes widened in alarm and a scream tore out of her throat as her paws were swept out from underneath her. With a sharp cry of fear, she crashed to the ground, making the entire scene blur. Pain burned in her side when claws lashed out at her, and a horrible scream tore out of her mouth when a paw smacked the back of her head. Blood dripped past her eyes, turning her vision red.

"Kill her." A low, cruel voice whispered in her ear and seemed to echo out over the entire battlefield at the same time, making her skin crawl with fear.

Terror swept over Saderia and her mouth gaped open in a silent scream. Just before the vision disappeared in a pool of scarlet blood, a horrifying sight glimmered on the edge of her vision. A fearsome rock rose up out of the desert sand, towering so high it seemed to pierce the sky. Huge rocks stacked one on top of the other led up to an enormous platform at the top of the horrifying formation. Spikes jutted out of the monstrous boulder. At the very top of the platform stood two shadowed figures. Their forms were covered in darkness, but their shadowed eyes seemed to bore right into her soul. A cold, sick laugh boomed out from the top of the awful rock seconds before everything disappeared in a thick swirl of blood.

"Dash!" Saderia jolted upward with a gasp, her eyes wide with alarm. Instinctively, she reached out for Dash, but he wasn't there. Blinking in surprise, she looked around wildly, her heart skipping a beat. Shadows surrounded her. Eerie moonlight shone through the hole in her ceiling, casting strange patterns across the shattered furniture. The gnarled posts at the end of her bare bed towered over her. A shiver raced through her as she

gazed at her surroundings. Vaguely, she realized it was her room, but her mind couldn't quite understand. The room was...unfamiliar. Eerie.

A whimper escaped her throat. "Dash?"

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew Dash was only a short walk away. Somehow, though, that didn't seem good enough. From the start, she had been reluctant to fall asleep in her room. It wasn't because she was afraid of being killed in her sleep—something she had had to worry about on her journeys. Instead, it was because she needed Dash close by to bring her back to reality after a terrifying Dream. Sadness washed over her. Her own room—a place she had once treasured—was now as foreign and unfamiliar as any land she had been to before. Despite how much easier life was in the forest, she felt no safer in her own room than she had out in the desert. She felt...restless.

Her eyes darted to the gaping hole in the ceiling above her bed. A determined glow crept into her eyes. The night sky outside was pitch black with only a few shimmering stars lighting up the room. Nobody would be up at that hour. Taking a deep breath, she crawled off of her bare, split mattress and leaned down to peer under the bed. After patting around beneath the mattress, she found what she was looking for and pulled out four small yellow packs. The packs were the same ones she and her friends had used to store rations during their last journey. When she had returned to the forest, she had hidden them under her bed to wait for a chance to use them again. Now was that chance.

Throwing the packs over her shoulder, she crept silently past the cracked door into the hallway. Her paws moved silently across the dirty floor and her body cast eerie shadows across the dark hallway. Ignoring the creepy darkness, Saderia crept out into the main room of the house, then quickly slunk past the archway into the dining room. Being careful not to make a sound, she picked her way over the shadowed railing and slunk into the kitchen. Setting the packs down on one of the still-standing counters, she opened the refrigerator and started stuffing as much food into the packs as she could. Soon, the packs were so full, they were nearly bursting at the seams. As an afterthought, Saderia filled four bottles with water from the sink and stuffed them into the packs, as well.

Once everything was packed, she slung the bags over her shoulder and crept back toward her room. Time to plan her next move. How long she

should search the desert, how to ration the food, how long they might be gone...All those things she had to plan. Even faced with the difficulty of the journey before her, Saderia felt a slight smile creep across her face. The unknown seemed less scary and more inviting than ever before.

“Well, that was the last neighborhood.” Saderia heaved a weary sigh and struggled to keep her head from drooping. Exhaustion made her tail drag tiredly along the dirt path and made the shadowy trail blur before her eyes. Shadows covered the woods on either side of the dark path, making it impossible to see anything other than dark branches reaching out toward her. A faint smile crossed her face as she struggled to keep moving. “It looked great, too.”

“Which means it’s time to leave,” Dash murmured, his eyes clouding with thought as he stumbled along the path.

Saderia nodded, her eyes glowing with determination. “Right.”

Dash took a deep breath. “When are we going to tell Dingo and Jeb?”

“Just as soon as I talk to Claw,” she muttered, her eyes shadowed with thought. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll tell them we’re leaving. That is, *if* I see Claw tonight.”

He shrugged, too exhausted to act skeptical. “I’m sure you will. It’s been about a week and all the neighborhoods look fine. We really should start looking for Karenisha.”

She sighed, a shadow crossing her face. “True. I just hope everything goes smoothly.”

Dash flicked her reassuringly with his tail. “Don’t worry. It will. After all, you’ve got everything under control, right?”

Saderia heaved a sigh. “Yeah, Dash. I’ve got everything under control.”

As if sensing that she was lying, he cast her a sideways glance, but didn’t question her. Saderia just kept her eyes trained on the road ahead and focused on getting home.

A silver crescent moon shone high in the sky. Bright stars had appeared in the black sky hours ago. Though she hadn’t seen a clock in hours, Saderia knew it must be around two or three in the morning. A yawn

involuntarily escaped her mouth at the thought. Beside her, Dash struggled to walk without stumbling sleepily off to the side.

The two of them had been traveling through the forest since before the sun had risen that morning. Both of them felt as though their paws were about to fall off. Had she had any other choice, Saderia would have preferred not to travel all day, but she felt it was necessary. Since that morning, she and Dash had traveled to every neighborhood in the forest to see how reconstruction was going. Thankfully, most of the neighborhoods were well on their way to prosperity. Many of the houses had been built back up and the rubble disposed of. A few places weren't in great shape, but those were few and far between. Saderia had been happy to see that nearly every place was doing well. What she hadn't been happy about was having to travel for so long to get to every neighborhood.

When she and Dash had first left, Makero had just barely let them go. The King had been reluctant to let them out of his sight, as if sensing they were getting closer to leaving. Even when she had agreed to let Dingo and Jeb stay behind to prove they wouldn't run away, her father had just barely agreed to it. Needless to say, Dingo and Jeb were happy to have missed out on the chance to travel the whole forest for nearly a full day.

After traveling for so long, Saderia could barely move another step. Her muscles burned so badly she could barely walk. All she wanted to do was fall asleep right there on the path, but she knew she couldn't. Summoning every last bit of strength, she staggered off the path and stumbled blindly across the dark, grassy clearing toward her house. Somehow, she found her way through the shadows and staggered in through the front door with Dash close behind her. All the strength left her at once. Her eyes fluttered shut and before she realized it, she had collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

Sitting at the table in the dining room, Makero looked up and blinked in shock when he saw them collapse with a soft thud. His broken chair scraped harshly across the ground as he leapt to his paws. Frantically, he darted over to the motionless animals and knelt down beside them to see if they were okay. A relieved sigh escaped his throat when he realized they were simply tired, not hurt. Letting out a soft breath, the King gazed down at the sleeping children sadly, his eyes clouding with regret. A gleam of

doubt crept into his green irises. His eyes turned to the stars, gleaming with uncertainty in their silvery light.

“If they’re really *this* determined to leave...then who am I to stop them?”

Saderia’s eyes fluttered open. Tiredly, she gazed out at her surroundings and felt a jolt of shock race through her. Sleepy sand dunes spread out all around her, meeting a starless sky on the horizon. A ghostly blue glow shrouded the dark land. Blinking in surprise, she stumbled to her paws and looked around vaguely. “Claw? Are you here?”

“Right behind you.” A light, feathery voice sounded behind her.

Turning around, Saderia broke out in a relieved smile when she spotted her spirit guide standing on a dune behind her, her light brown fur glowing faintly in the dim light of the spirit realm. “Hi, Claw. What’s going on?”

Claw smiled faintly, her light brown eyes shining. “First, I should tell you that your mother is doing fine. And second, I came to tell you that it’s time for you to leave.”

A flash of excitement shot through Saderia. “Really? It’s finally time to go?”

Claw nodded and happily flicked her wispy light brown tail. “It finally is. Now that the forest has built its strength back up and repaired most of its neighborhoods, it will be strong enough to face anything. You are free to leave whenever you like. In the time you’re gone, the kingdom will probably build itself back up completely. When you return, I’ll bet that everything will be exactly as it was before the hunters came.”

Saderia’s eyes glowed with hope “That’s great.” She paused, then eagerly flicked her tail, feeling excitement bubble in her chest. “I can’t wait to tell the others!”

A warm smile crossed Claw’s face. “What time do you think would be best to leave?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes in thought. “How about...the day after tomorrow? I want to give Dash, Dingo, and Jeb time to prepare for the journey and work out any, er, family problems. I also want a chance to say goodbye to Loki and Lisa.” She paused and gazed thoughtfully at the sleepy dunes. “As for the time...I think we should leave at the crack of dawn. That

way, we'll have had a few hours to rest and build up our strength. At dawn, no one will be awake yet either, so we'll be able to slip away unnoticed."

Claw's eyes twinkled encouragingly. "I think that's wise."

"Thanks." Saderia paused, then tipped her head to the side, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

Claw hesitated. Her smile wavered and a shadow flitted across her face. The light spirit bit her lip and remained silent for a long, tense moment, then slowly looked down at her paws and gave a tiny shake of her head. "No. There's nothing else I should say." She hesitated, then managed a weak smile. "Except good luck to you and your friends."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then hesitantly returned the smile, shaking off her confusion. "Thanks Claw. I guess I'll see you later."

The spirit simply smiled. Seconds later, darkness seeped into the misty scene, making the spirit world fade before her and dragging her down into unconsciousness.

Sunlight streamed in through the cracks in the walls and the front door, bathing the floor and the two animals laying in the doorway in bright yellow light. A long, sleepy yawn escaped Dash's mouth. Tiredly, he lifted his head and gazed around in bewilderment, taking in his surroundings with a confused gleam in his half-lidded eyes. The dark lion lay on the hard wood floor just in front of the open door with Saderia close beside him, fast asleep. Fluffy blue pillows had been pushed under their heads and a soft blanket was draped over their backs. Confusion gleamed in Dash's eyes. How had he gotten here?

Suddenly, memories of the night before returned to him. The second he recalled stumbling into the house and collapsing, his muscles burned with pain, as if remembering last night's exhaustion. Heaving a sigh, Dash reluctantly wriggled out from under the blanket and pushed himself to his paws, stretching his aching legs. Carefully, he tucked the blanket around Saderia and smiled, then crept silently through the open door. Closing the door quietly behind him, he sat back on the soft, dewy grass. Shaking his unruly dark brown mane out of his eyes, he gazed up at the puffy white clouds and heaved a sigh.

Soon, he would be leaving his home behind again. To his surprise, the thought didn't seem to bother him. Instead of fear or unease, all he felt

was a dull sense of calmness and resignation. Even though he wished he could just enjoy being home, he didn't dread leaving as much as he thought he would. Deep down, he didn't really care where he was as long as he was with Saderia and his friends.

The journey loomed close on the horizon. Plenty of dangers and challenges would be waiting for them—sneaking away without getting caught, finding Karenisha, surviving on small rations, avoiding enemy dingoos, and surviving the desert in general—but for some reason, those threats weren't what concerned him that morning. A different thought burned in his mind, sending a tiny shiver of unease down his spine. Obviously, he had much more pressing matters to worry about, but instead of thinking of the journey, Dash's mind was clouded with questions about what he had seen from the top of Hillcrest Rock.

He wasn't even sure *what* he had seen, if he had seen anything at all. All he knew was that *something* had caught his eye. When he had stood at the top of Hillcrest Rock and gazed out at the forest, his eyes had automatically been drawn to his old clearing in the woods. A flicker of something dark against the bright green leaves had caught his eye, but the second he tried to look closely, it was gone. It had vanished into thin air. Even so, a powerful sense of unease and even fear had left him frozen like a statue, as if he somehow knew that something about it was strange. The eerie feeling confused him. Saderia was the one who was supposed to sense things others couldn't pick up on. Maybe he had somehow 'caught' some of her special senses. Either way, it bothered him.

Something about the whole thing was off. How could he have possibly seen something that far away to begin with? And why would anyone be lurking around that particular clearing? The thought sent a shiver down his spine. Even if he wasn't sure *what* he had seen, he was sure of *where* he had seen it. He would never forget his old clearing in the woods, the place he had lived after running away from his evil father. It wasn't as if he owned the clearing, but it seemed strange to think of anyone creeping around his old home. The clearing was fairly out-of-the-way, too, so why would anyone be there at all?

Dash heaved a sigh and shook his head forcefully, pushing the thoughts away. Thinking about the strange vision was creeping him out too much and he had much more important things to focus on. Even when he

tried to ignore the eerie feeling, though, the odd vision still burned in the back of his mind. Flattening his ears, the dark lion scowled in frustration, then jumped and nearly yelped when a soft voice sounded behind him.

“Dash?” Saderia peeked out from behind the front door, then crept outside to sit down beside him, a tired smile on her face. “What are you doing out here?”

Dash uncomfortably looked away. “Nothing. I just didn’t want to disturb you.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Oh, all right. Thanks.” She paused, then looked up with a bright, eager gleam in her eyes. “Hey, I talked to Claw last night.”

Dash’s ears pricked up in surprise. “Really? What did she say?”

“She said we’re free to leave whenever we want.” Saderia flicked her tail eagerly, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I want to leave at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Could you do me a favor and go tell Dingo and Jeb? And make sure they’re fine with it?”

Dash nodded quickly. “Of course. Do you want me to go right now?”

“Sure, that would be great.” Saderia glanced back at the house and lightly flicked her tail. “I’m sure you’ll be back before Dad wakes up. If he does wake up before then, though, I’ll just tell him you went to ask Dingo and Jeb to help with the house. We might need them here today to help out, anyway, since we’ll be at the Home of the Leopards.”

He blinked in surprise. “We’re going there today? To say goodbye to Loki?”

She nodded and cast him a thoughtful glance. “That’s okay with you, right?”

“Of course.” Dash gave her a warm smile, then gazed out at the forest. “I’ll go talk to Dingo and Jeb and be back as soon as I can. See you later, Saderia.”

She smiled and flicked him warmly with her tail. “Thanks. See you then.”

A small clearing appeared beyond a clump of dense trees in the center of the woods. Brushing leaves from his mane, Dash stepped out past a thick patch of undergrowth and padded onto the beaten trail leading to the

back of the clearing. Several rocky houses rose up at the very end of the grassy area. Morning sunlight shimmered down through the trees, lighting up the small dens with yellow light.

With a slight smile, Dash padded down the dusty path and paused in front of the first house where Dingo lived. He hesitated by the front door, then knocked quickly and leaned closer to the cracked door to listen for paw steps. “Dingo?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming!” Dingo’s grumpy voice sounded sharply from somewhere inside the house. “Learn some patience, would you?”

Dash rolled his eyes and tried to stifle a laugh. A second later, the door creaked open and Dingo poked his head out through the crack, his ears flattened and his eyes narrowed. His shaggy brown fur stuck out wildly in all directions and his eyes were clouded with exhaustion. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he gave Dash a tired glare.

Dash snickered and mockingly waved a paw. “Hi, Dingo. Did I wake you up?”

Dingo let out an annoyed sigh and rolled his eyes. “This better be important.”

Hiding a grin, Dash struggled to keep a serious face. “It is. Saderia wants to leave at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning, so you need to be ready by then. Today, we’ll be gone, saying goodbye to friends and whatnot, but we’ll meet you tomorrow.”

“You couldn’t have waited until the sun came up to tell me that?” Dingo curled his lip, then just shook his head. “Whatever. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be there on time.”

Dash cracked a grin. “Sorry. Anyway, I guess I’ll see you then.” He paused, then cast a regretful glance at the house next to Dingo’s. “I guess I have to wake up Jeb now.”

“Oh, sure, you feel all guilty about disturbing *his* sleep, but you don’t mind bothering me.” Dingo cast him a withering glare. “Your kindness is so touching, Dash.”

Dash just snickered and waved. “Oh well. See you later!”

“‘*See you later!*’ I can’t believe I get woken up this early...” Dingo whipped around and slammed the door in Dash’s face, muttering under his breath the whole time.

Dash raised an eyebrow and chuckled under his breath. Shaking his head, he turned away from Dingo's door and stepped toward the second house where Jeb's family lived. He hesitated when he reached the front door, then knocked cautiously, hoping he wouldn't give Jeb's fearful parents a heart attack by showing up so unexpectedly.

The door slipped open a crack and a female kraguer cautiously poked her head out to look outside, a cold, suspicious glare on her face. "Who are...Oh..." A small hint of recognition gleamed in the eyes of Jeb's mother, but she still glared at Dash. "You're one of Jeb's friends, aren't you? The Prince guy, right?"

Dash nodded and smiled. "Yes, I'm Dash. Is it okay if I talk to Jeb for a minute?"

Jati curled her lip and eyed him distrustfully. "I suppose. As long as you don't eat him." Giving Dash a lingering, suspicious glare, she slowly ducked back into the house and raised her voice to a shout. "Jeb! Get out here! Your creature friend is here!"

The soft thud of paw steps sounded somewhere inside the house. A second later, Jeb appeared in the doorway and silently slipped outside, a tired, bewildered gleam in his blue/green eyes. "Dash?" He tipped his head to the side and frowned, partially closing the door behind him. "What are you doing here?"

Dash cast a glance at the open door, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Saderia wants us to leave on the journey tomorrow at the crack of dawn. Can you make it?"

Jeb blinked in surprise, then bristled in alarm. "We're leaving so soon?"

Dash shrugged. "It's been a week. We can't just let Karenisha stay missing forever."

"I...guess you're right." He looked nervously at his paws. "It just seems scary..."

Dash rested his tail gently on Jeb's shoulder. "You made it once and it wasn't so bad. Come on, Jeb. You know Saderia won't leave without all of us."

Jeb took a deep, shaky breath. "All right...But what am I going to tell my parents?"

Dash lightly flicked his tail. "I would probably just leave them a note before you sneak out. That's what Saderia's going to do."

Jeb gaped at him in shock. "Just a note?"

Dash raised an eyebrow. "Do you really think they'll let you go if you tell them?"

"Well..." Jeb shuffled his paws uncertainly. "They did last time..."

"But they might not do it again." Dash leveled his gaze with Jeb's and sighed. "Look, Jeb, you can tell them however you want. Just make sure they know you'll be safe, whether you say it to their face or in a note. Make sure they don't worry too much."

Jeb managed a weak, anxious nod. "All right. I...I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Dash gave him a faint smile. "All right, good. Thanks. Saderia will be relieved."

Jeb weakly returned the smile. "All right. Bye, Dash."

When Dash said goodbye, Jeb hesitated, then crept nervously back into his house, shutting the door tightly behind him. Dash heaved a sigh and turned back to face the woods. Everything seemed ready. Only a few more hours and they would be gone...

"So they're okay with leaving?" Saderia glanced anxiously at Dash as she padded along the dusty, overgrown path, her eyes narrowed with worry. "Even on such short notice...?"

Dash flicked her lightly with his tail. "They're fine. They'll be ready to leave tomorrow. They don't mind. They know this is important and they'll be there for you. Jeb will find a way to break the news to his parents and Dingo...well, he probably can't wait to get out of the forest. Everything will be fine." He gave her a warm smile. "I promise."

Saderia heaved a soft sigh and weakly returned the smile. "I hope so." Trailing off, she paused when the trees on either side of her fell away and opened up into a wide clearing. Sunlight streamed down into the dusty clearing of the Home of the Leopards, lighting up broken houses and casting a glow on the spotted animals working on their homes. Hanging back by the dense trees and undergrowth that lined the edges of the woods, Saderia scanned the clearing for any sign of her friends. A second later, she

spotted Loki and Lisa standing by one of the houses, gazing up at the cracks in the wood and talking quietly.

Saderia took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. "I guess we should just go and get this over with...I hope Loki doesn't get too upset to hear we're leaving."

"I'm sure she'll be fine." Dash rested his tail reassuringly on her shoulder. "She would be much more upset if we just left without a word."

"True." Saderia heaved a sigh and managed a weak smile. "All right. Let's get the goodbyes out of the way." When Dash nodded and gestured for her to lead the way, she reluctantly stepped into the Home of the Leopards and bounded toward her two friends. "Loki!" she called, darting past leopards into the dusty clearing. "Lisa!"

Loki looked up in surprise, then grinned when Saderia and Dash skidded to a halt in front of her and Lisa. Her green eyes twinkled. "Hey, guys. What's up?"

Lisa frowned curiously as they sat back in front of her. "Is everything okay?"

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly, meeting their curious stares. "Everything's fine. I just wanted to say goodbye to you two."

Loki's eyes darkened with understanding. "Oh. So..."

"Yeah." She glanced anxiously down at her paws. "We're leaving tomorrow."

Loki took a deep breath and let it out slowly, managing to give them a weak smile. "All right. I guess this is goodbye for now then. Good luck on your journey." She rested her tail warmly on Saderia's shoulder. "I hope you find your Mom."

Saderia smiled back gratefully. "Thanks, Loki. I'm sure I'll be back soon."

Worry clouded Lisa's eyes. "What if you're not? What if you don't come back?"

"Lisa." Loki shot her friend a stern glare and sharply flicked her tail. "They'll be back. Trust me." She paused, then cast a playful glance back at Saderia and Dash. "These guys are practically professionals at this kind of thing anyway."

Saderia laughed. "We're hardly professionals. But thanks."

“No problem. It’s true, after all.” The cheetah hesitated, then raised an eyebrow with a playful gleam in her eyes. “Anyway, since this is your last day in the forest, why not enjoy it? How about we play a game? You know...act normal, keep up appearances?”

Saderia grinned and nodded eagerly. “Sure, Loki. That would be great.”

Loki’s eyes glowed mischievously. “In that case...tag!” With a quick flick of her tail, she tapped Saderia’s shoulder, then leapt away from her.

Saderia let out a gasp, then laughed as the others bolted away from her. “Hey, that’s not fair!” she exclaimed, her tail curling up in amusement. “You’re a cheetah!”

“Then you’re lucky I’m not it!” Giving her a playful wink, Loki raced off in a blur of yellow fur and spots.

Saderia shook her head and laughed, a bright smile spreading across her face. Whipping around, she darted after Loki to give chase, her eyes glowing with amusement. Her worries disappeared as she raced across the dusty clearing, laughing happily. When it came to making the most stressful situations lighthearted, Loki was the master. Her heart remained light and unburdened and her smile didn’t fade away for the rest of the day.

Stars twinkled in the black night sky, casting silver light through the holes in the roof of Saderia’s house. Peaceful silence filled only with the rustling of leaves and the chirping of crickets filtered in from outside. The shadowed house was quiet. Most of its inhabitants were already tucked into bed. Everything seemed still and calm. A faint glow shone in Saderia’s amber eyes as she paused in front of the door to her room. Dash stood close beside her at the end of the shadowed hallway, staring at the cracked open doors to their rooms. The two of them had returned from the Home of the Leopards a few hours ago and had already said goodnight to the rest of their family. Now all that was left to do was sleep and wait for the next morning when their adventure would begin...

Saderia let out a sigh and nudged Dash. “You get some sleep. I’ll write the note.”

Dash smiled weakly and rested his tail comfortably on her shoulder. “Don’t stress yourself out about it too much. You need rest, too, okay?”

“All right.” She faintly returned the smile. “Goodnight, Dash. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, Saderia.” Dash nodded to her, then turned around and slowly crept into his darkened room, leaving the door open a crack.

The instant the dark lion disappeared into his room, Saderia let out a shaky breath and closed her eyes. Pushing away equal amounts of fear and anticipation, she slunk silently into her room, letting the door click shut behind her. Shadows covered the room, but a glow of moonlight drifted in through the hole in the ceiling, bathing her bed in silver light. Quietly, she leaned down and reached into the partially smashed bedside table to pull out her mother’s old diary. Crawling onto the bed, she tore out a fresh sheet of paper, grabbed a pen from inside the drawer beside her, and tried to think of what to write. ‘Dear Dad.’ Two words at the top of the paper. Now what to write? Saderia heaved a sigh and closed her eyes tiredly. She had a feeling she would be there for a while...

In the next room, Dash crawled tiredly into bed and pulled his blanket up to his nose. Closing his eyes, he flicked his mane over his face, as if blocking his vision would somehow block out his thoughts of the arduous journey ahead. It didn’t. Heaving a sigh, he pulled the blanket over his head and buried his face in his pillow. Before, he hadn’t felt so uneasy about the journey, but in the dead of night, fears and doubts crept into his mind. A voice in the back of his head told him this journey would be different from all the others. Some small voice whispered that he was walking into horrible danger.

A shiver raced down Dash’s spine. Shaking the thoughts from his head, he ducked under the blanket to avoid the eerie shadows covering his room. Taking deep breaths, he told himself not to worry about it and to calm down and fall asleep, knowing he needed his rest for the journey. At that point, there was hardly anything he could do to stop the journey anyway. It would happen regardless of whatever danger might be lurking in the world beyond the forest. The only thing he could do was wait and see what happened...

Exhaustion washed over Dash like a wave as the thoughts swirled through his mind. With a soft sigh, he started to drift off into unconscious. Right before he fell asleep, a memory of the strange vision he had seen atop

Hillcrest Rock flashed through his mind. A second later, a cold sense of fear swept over him, plunging him into darkness.

Dash's eyes fluttered open sleepily, revealing a strange, blurry world around him. Instantly, panic seized him, making his eyes open wide and sending him stumbling frantically to his paws. His mouth gaped open in a gasp and all the fur on his back rose up in alarm as he took in his eerie surroundings. A shadowy clearing took shape from the darkness around him. Dry, wintry grass covered the ground. Stark, dead pine trees dotted the edges of the clearing, reaching out with skeletal branches and blocking out the pitch black sky. The colorless grass felt cold and brittle. No flowers grew up from the freezing earth. Instead, weeds covered with fierce thorns crept along the outskirts of the clearing and wound around the dead trees. Shadows covered the clearing and the woods around it. Only a faint glimmer of eerie light illuminated the nightmare clearing, keeping the woods beyond shrouded in darkness.

Dash spun around in a frantic circle, his eyes wide with horror. Where was he? This wasn't where he had fallen asleep! How had he gotten here? What was this place? Wildly, he gazed around at his surroundings and felt shock jolt through him when he recognized the strange clearing. The eerie land around him was his old clearing in the woods, the place he had lived in before moving in with Saderia. Only it was worse than he remembered. Confusion and fear made his vision blur. What was he doing there?

His heart pounded with fear. Desperately, he gazed around the clearing, searching for anyone or anything that could explain what was happening. Frantically, he looked up at the sky and felt his heart skip a beat when he saw past the skeletal canopy. No stars shimmered in the pitch black sky and no moon was in sight. Yet there was still a faint glow lighting up the clearing and leaving the rest of the woods in shadows. How? Shakily, Dash whirled around and peered into the darkness shrouding the woods beyond the clearing. His fur prickled with fear and discomfort. A million different eyes seemed to bore into him from within the darkness, eyes he couldn't see. Was it just his imagination?

Frantically, he whirled around to look behind him and nearly let out a shout of alarm. All the fur along his back rose up in terror. A shadowed

figure sat hunched over in the shadows near the outskirts of the clearing, his face and form hidden in darkness. Dash's eyes widened in terror. On shaking legs, he staggered away from the figure but never took his eyes off it. A dull hint of recognition gleamed in his eyes as he took in the figure and a strange sense of shock froze him in place. Slowly, the figure began to take shape out of the shadows. Strong, powerful dark brown shoulders rose up out of the darkness. Thick claws from heavy paws kneaded the cold ground. A long, pitch black mane cascaded down the shadowy lion's back, hiding most of him from sight.

Dash's heart stopped. A horrifying sense of recognition washed over him and he stumbled back, his paws numb with fear. Chills raced down his spine and every hair on his back rose up in alarm. His eyes grew wide with terror as he stared at the figure, never blinking. His entire body seemed frozen in disbelief. It couldn't be...It wasn't possible...

The shadowed figure lifted his head, as if sensing Dash's presence. Dash's claws unsheathed and he tried to move, but he remained frozen in place. Slowly, the dark figure turned around to face him, throwing back his black mane in a swirl of shadows and revealing his face. Every inch of Dash froze in terror and his mouth gaped open in a silent cry. Gleaming amber eyes pierced into his soul, and a cold, evil smirk curled across the lion's face. A soft chuckle breathed out of the dark lion's mouth.

"Hello, son. I've been waiting a very long time to speak to you again."

Chapter Nine

Old Ghosts

Dear Dad,

I've been trying to figure out what to say to you for the past half hour and I still don't know, so the best I can do is just say it. I'm leaving with Dash, Dingo, and Jeb to find my Mom. I know you've been trying to stop me, and I know you're afraid for me, and I know you might think this is hopeless, but I truly believe that I'll be able to find her. I need to find her, Dad. For my sake, for your sake, and for the kingdom's sake.

Anyway, I'm really sorry that I had to leave without telling you in person. I already regret it because I hate going behind your back. But I want you to know that I am going to be fine. Dash, Dingo, and Jeb will take care of me and I will take care of them. We won't ever let anything bad happen to each other. You can count on that. We're all going to be just fine. We have to do this. I can't just go on wondering if my Mom is okay or not.

Please don't worry about us. I'll never be able to live with myself if I hurt you so much by leaving. Please remember that I have so many wonderful friends on my side, and please remember that we'll always look out for each other. And remember that Dash and I love you so much and we're so, so grateful to you for trying so hard to protect us.

I love you, Dad, and I will survive for your sake. I promise I won't be gone for long, but I also promise that I'll only come back when we've found Mom. Until I see you again, look after Cia, Uncle Jash, and the kingdom.

Love, Saderia

Saderia took a deep, heavy breath and let it out slowly, her eyes narrowing with regret. For a long moment, she stared down at her note, reading the neat words over and over again and wanting to change them

each time. Would the note really be enough to reassure Makero? Probably not, but it was better than nothing.

A long sigh escaped her throat. Gingerly, she tucked the note into the diary and set the old book on top of her bedside table, forcing thoughts of the note out of her head. A long journey waited for her in the morning. She couldn't spend all night worrying about the note when she had to get her rest. Taking a deep breath, she slowly crawled into her broken bed and pulled the blanket up over her head to block out the rest of her room. In the morning, when Makero found the note, she would be glad she wasn't there to see his face. Until morning came, though, all she could do was sleep and hope for the best.

Slowly, her eyes slipped shut and darkness washed over her, pulling her into a deep sleep. With a soft sigh, she drifted off into unconsciousness. Meanwhile, in the room right beside hers, Dash's heart had temporarily stopped beating.

"You..." Dash gaped at the menacing figure before him, his fur bristling and his eyes wide with disbelief. Every hair on his body bristled and his claws dug into the cold, stiff grass in alarm. His whole body felt frozen in horror. How was this possible? Slowly, he shook his head, as if unable to believe his eyes. "You...What are you doing here?"

Dastarius raised an eyebrow and sat back in front of him, a cool sneer on his face. "Relax, Dashenirus. Dash, as your friends call you. I'm not here to hurt you."

Dash blinked several times and stared back at him in shock, unmoving. First of all...yeah, right. Second of all, how was this even happening? His eyes flitted frantically back and forth, desperately searching for any escape. How had he gotten here? Why was he seeing creepy animals who *should* be dead? His head spun. Nothing made sense!

A dark chuckle tore him out of his thoughts. Wildly, Dash whirled around to see Dastarius staring at him with an amused sneer. All the fur on Dash's back rose up in alarm at the sound of his eerie laugh. He remembered that cold snicker all too well...

Dastarius raised an eyebrow and sneered. "I'm sure this is very confusing for you. Tell me when you've calmed down."

Dash gaped at him in disbelief. "What is going on?"

Dastarius stared back at him unflinchingly with eerie, glowing amber eyes so like his own. The dark lion merely flicked his tail around at the clearing, saying nothing.

Dash blinked several times and gazed wildly around the clearing, avoiding Dastarius's gaze and trying desperately to figure out what was going on. How could he get out of there? His eyes flitted to the shadowed woods around him and a shiver raced down his spine at the sight of the darkness covering the forest. Pure blackness stared back at him from beyond the eerily lit clearing. Confusion blurred his vision. What *was* this place? How had he gotten here? And how was he seeing Dastarius? The creepy lion was supposed to be *dead*! How could he possibly be sitting right in front of him?

Realization hit him like a bolt of lightning. This was a dream!

Dash's eyes grew wide with incredulity and his mind whirled with frantic, desperate thoughts. Was this really just a weird, horrible nightmare, one that he would wake up from soon? Or was it...something else? A dark sense of disquiet bubbled in his chest. *Saderia* had Dreams where she could talk to...dead beings, like Claw, but she was special. Her Dream sense and the prophecy gave her the ability to see ghosts. She was the only one in the world who should be able to see spirits. But hadn't Dash seen Claw himself?

Shivers raced down his spine. He wasn't special like she was...and yet he had clearly seen *Saderia's* spirit guide before. His eyes grew wide with shock. Hadn't *Saderia* once told him that some of her 'special' abilities might start to 'rub off' on him? After being together for so long, some of her special powers had started to transfer to him, and Dingo and Jeb, as well. Her power to feel what others were feeling...her power to see ghosts...All her powers save for her Dreams themselves had been transferred to him...

Shock and horror gleamed in Dash's eyes. No! He couldn't have Dreams like this! He wasn't supposed to! It wasn't normal for him to see ghosts in his sleep. That was *Saderia's* job! This was her territory, not his! Disbelief and bewilderment whirled wildly through his mind. What was Dastarius doing here? Why would he want to see him? Dastarius hated him!

All the fur on his back bristled in fear. He wasn't meant to have these kinds of dreams. How could he escape? What did *Saderia* do to get

out of ghostly Dreams? Was there some kind of secret to waking up safe and sound, away from creepy spirits? Frantically, Dash looked around, but felt his heart sink when he saw nothing but darkness and shadows covering the area beyond the clearing. Whether this was his clearing or not, in this strange dream world, he had no way of knowing what horrible things lay in the darkness beyond the eerie, illuminated clearing. For now, there was no way out...

A shiver raced through him. Shakily, he looked back up at his father and felt a jolt of shock course through him. Dastarius was really there, sitting right in front of him. A ghost. An actual, real ghost, not a figment of his imagination. The dark lion was really, truly there. And Dash had no way of getting away.

Shakily, Dash took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm the fear rising in his chest. "Why...why are you here?" he choked out.

Dastarius wrapped his tail calmly around his paws and faced him coolly. "I've come to see you."

Dash blinked in disbelief. "*Why? You hate me.*"

Dastarius blinked in surprise. "What? Why would I hate my only son?"

Dash frowned and sharply lashed his tail. "I don't know, but you did!"

A slight sneer curled up the corners of Dastarius's mouth and he let out a soft, patronizing chuckle. "I didn't hate you, son. Or Dash, as they now call you."

Dash nervously flattened his ears and tried to suppress a shiver. "So you...know?"

Dastarius frowned in confusion. "Know?"

"About...Saderia." Shivering, Dash quickly looked down at his paws to avoid his father's eyes, feeling his fur rise up in fear. If Dastarius was calling him Dash, he must know that he and Saderia were friends—Saderia had been the one to give him that nickname, after all. The thought sent a wave of unease and anxiety washing over him. Dastarius hated Saderia more than anyone. The dark lion probably wouldn't be pleased to know his son had befriended his archenemy.

"That you live with her?" The spirit coolly flicked his tail. "Of course I know."

Shock glimmered in Dash's eyes and he looked up in disbelief. "You don't care?"

Dastarius shrugged. "Not particularly."

Dash blinked in shock and disbelief. "*Really?*"

The dark lion arched an eyebrow. "You sound surprised."

"Well...yeah!" Dash gaped at him in disbelief. "You hate her!"

Dastarius flicked his tail lightly and absently studied his claws. "Perhaps. But I've realized it is pointless to keep hating her for the rest of eternity. I am dead, after all."

Dash blinked in surprise and frowned. His father had to be lying... but why would he bother to lie? What could he gain from it? The lack of concern and the absence of emotions on Dastarius's face were convincing. What if he was serious?

Shaking the thoughts from his head, Dash faced Dastarius with narrowed amber eyes. "So...Why exactly did you want to see me?"

Dastarius glanced up from his claws and met Dash's eyes with dark amber eyes glowing knowingly in the dim light. Slowly, he dropped his paw back down to the ground and studied Dash closely for a long moment. Silence spread out between them. After what felt like ages, the dark lion simply heaved a sigh and looked away. "Clearly, you're still uncomfortable. I had hoped that since your friend talked to spirits, you would be more at ease talking with one yourself, but apparently, I was wrong."

Dash's eyes widened in shock. "You know that Saderia talks to ghosts?"

"Of course." Dastarius calmly flicked his tail. "Word spreads among the dead just as it does among the living."

A shiver raced down Dash's spine. "What else do you know?"

The dark lion shrugged lightly. "About as much as you do. I know about your friends, your exploits, your plans..."

Horror gleamed in Dash's eyes. "So you've been watching me all this time?"

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "Occasionally. When you die, you'll realize that ghosts don't exactly have better things to do. Spirits are often restless." The lion paused, then narrowed his eyes darkly, a shadow flitting across his face. "Of course, if you aren't careful, you might find that out sooner rather than later."

A wave of cold fear washed over Dash, sending shivers racing down his spine. He nervously narrowed his eyes. "What is that supposed to mean? Are you threatening me?"

Dastarius blinked in surprise, then let out a scornful laugh. "Of course not. Ghosts cannot harm the living, Dash."

A frown spread across Dash's face. "Then what *did* you mean?"

"If I told you, I don't know if you would believe me." Dastarius rose to his paws and slowly started to turn. "Perhaps I should come back later when you've calmed down."

"No, wait!" Dash's eyes widened in alarm and he frantically stumbled after him, as if he actually thought he could stop him. Why he wanted Dastarius to stop, he didn't know. Something about the way his father had spoken to him sent a jolt of fear and disquiet racing through him. Too curious for his own good, he wanted to know what Dastarius meant and why he was there in the first place. At the same time, he didn't want to know.

Dastarius paused, then slowly turned back to face him, his eyes glowing eerily in the dim light. A knowing, patient expression crossed his face.

Dash took a shaky breath. "Can't you just tell me why you came here?"

Dastarius flippantly flicked his tail. "I don't want to waste my breath if you're just going to ignore my warning."

Dash let out a long, heavy sigh. "Fine. I'll listen. Okay?" When Dastarius just raised an eyebrow, Dash flattened his ears and shot him a cold glare. "Look, I need to know why you suddenly came to see me out of nowhere. It's...weird."

Dastarius shrugged and coolly sat back to face him. "I suppose it would be inconsiderate if I left you without an explanation."

A frown spread across Dash's face, but he sat down to face Dastarius as calmly as possible. Taking a deep breath, he mimicked his father and curled his tail neatly over his paws, trying to hide his unease and avoid showing him how unnerved he was. Maybe if Dastarius thought Dash was calm, he would tell him what was going on.

The dark spirit stared directly into Dash's eyes with glowing amber irises, sending a shiver of unease racing down Dash's spine. Flicking his

tail, Dastarius lightly settled himself on the ground to speak. “Well...I’ve been watching you for quite a while. I even went to your old clearing in the woods a few times, but you were never there. You were with your friend.”

So it had been Dastarius who Dash had seen in his old clearing from atop Hillcrest Rock. No wonder it had unsettled him...

“It is my understanding,” Dastarius went on, coolly meeting Dash’s gaze, “that your little friend can speak to ghosts, and that some of that ability has transferred to you.”

Dash hesitated uncomfortably. Somehow, it felt wrong to tell his father that was true, but he nodded anyway. If he already knew, what was the harm in confirming it?

Dastarius sneered faintly. “So now you can see ghosts, as well. I had to wait a long time to speak to you. When you gained the ability to see ghosts, I had my chance. However, I doubted you wanted to speak to me, so I almost gave up the idea of coming to visit you. Then I realized that you were in danger and I decided I might as well try to warn you, whether you wanted to listen to me or not.”

The fur on Dash’s back prickled with unease, but he narrowed his eyes skeptically. “How am I in danger?”

Dastarius scornfully raised an eyebrow. “Dash, I know about Princess’s plans to leave the forest to find Karenisha.”

An overwhelming sense of déjà vu crashed over Dash. Shock glimmered in his amber eyes. He hadn’t heard anyone call Saderia ‘Princess’ in a long, long time.

Dastarius narrowed his eyes and sharply flicked his tail. “Do you have any idea what you’re getting into? Do you know what you’re going to find out there?”

Dash blinked several times and frowned, still stunned and barely hearing his words. “Her name’s not Princess,” he muttered.

The dark lion calmly flicked his tail. “My mistake.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and stared uncomfortably down at his paws. Dastarius’s words slowly started to sink in as he shook off his disquiet at hearing the word ‘Princess.’ A sense of unease washed over him, but he pushed it away and slowly looked up to meet his father’s gaze with challenging amber eyes. “I have...an idea of what I’m getting into. It doesn’t matter if I don’t know exactly what I’m going to find, anyway. I’ve

done this kind of thing plenty of times before. I think I've got the process down by now."

Dastarius's eyes flashed with scorn. "So you think that since you've traveled the desert before, you can just breeze through this and not worry about danger at all?"

"Well..." Dash shrugged awkwardly. "Kind of..."

Dastarius flattened his ears. "Then you really *are* going to die."

Dash narrowed his eyes and lashed his tail sharply, ignoring a twinge of unease. "What are you talking about anyway? What exactly is going to kill me?"

Dastarius heaved a sigh and gravely narrowed his eyes. "If you can't trust me, then telling you what I think will be a waste of time. Just be careful in your travels, son."

Giving Dash one last, grim glance, the dark spirit rose to his paws and turned around to walk away. His tail flicked coolly back and forth as he crept across the eerily lit clearing and stalked toward the darkness of the woods behind him. Dash sat frozen in place, his mind whirling with everything he had heard and his fur still bristling with fear. The sudden appearance of his long-dead father still shocked him, leaving him petrified where he sat. Why had he come to visit him and what had he been trying to tell him?

After everything Dastarius had done, Dash doubted he could ever trust the evil lion. Dastarius had to have been lying to him about everything he had said that night, from not caring about his relationship with Saderia to the 'danger' he had warned him about. Why would he lie, though? The thought bothered Dash. Dastarius was and always had been a liar...but what could he hope to gain from lying to Dash now? The evil lion was dead. What exactly could he get out of lying to Dash now that he was nothing more than a strange distortion of air? Normally, Dash would assume that anything Dastarius said or did was done for the purpose of hurting Saderia, and this seemed to be no exception. When he really thought about it, though, it didn't make sense. How would warning him and trying to help him avoid being killed hurt Saderia?

A frown spread across his face. Nothing made sense. Saderia was Dastarius's mortal enemy, the one he wanted to destroy more than anything...yet here he was, helping her friend. The evil spirit had to have an

ulterior motive...but what was it? No matter how hard he tried, Dash couldn't think of anything Dastarius might gain from it. Why would Dastarius help him, though? When he had been alive, he couldn't have cared less about Dash's life and well-being. Could death really have changed him that much?

On the edge of the clearing, a leaf crackled, making Dash look up sharply. His eyes widened in alarm when he saw Dastarius's dark, twitching tail start to disappear into the shadows of the woods. Frantically, he leapt to his paws and let out a shout. "Wait! Come back, Dad!" The instant the words left his mouth, a wave of shock washed over him, freezing him in place. He hadn't called anyone 'Dad' in a long time...

Dastarius froze in the darkness, then slowly turned back to look at his son, his amber eyes glowing through the shadows. Carefully, he stepped through the undergrowth on the edge of the clearing and stalked back toward Dash. When he stood just inches away from him, he sat back and coolly curled his tail over his paws. "Yes?"

Nervousness swept over Dash at being so close to his father after all this time. Shaking it off, he took a deep breath and looked uncomfortably down at his paws, biting his lip. After several moments of silence, he sighed. "I don't understand why you're here, telling me this. When you were alive, you hated me."

Dastarius blinked in surprise. "I didn't hate you. I just had other things to do."

Dash narrowed his eyes and bitterly lashed his tail. "Yeah, like kill Saderia." The moment the words slipped out, he froze and felt a jolt of fear and disbelief shoot through him. *What* had possessed him to say something like that to *Dastarius* of all animals? Mentally bracing himself, he prepared to run.

To his surprise, though, Dastarius merely shrugged and gave only a mildly irked flick of his tail. "I admit it wasn't one of my finer moments."

Dash blinked in shock, his eyes wide with surprise. He wasn't going to die?

Dastarius's eyes bored into his, glowing with grimness and severity. "I'm here because I don't exactly have anything left anymore. You're my last connection to the real world. I realize I wasn't a great father, but perhaps I can make it up now by saving you."

Dash gazed up at him in surprise, his eyes wide and bewildered. Dastarius's eyes never left his. Discomfort rose in Dash's chest and he hastily looked away to study the ground, his mind reeling and his paws itching with nervousness and disbelief. It was still hard to believe anything Dastarius said...but maybe this time, he was actually telling the truth. For once. After all...the thought of being dead and alone in the spirit world did seem kind of lonely. Maybe he wasn't lying. Maybe he really did want to help Dash...

Quickly, he shook himself and cursed himself. He couldn't let himself fall into a trap. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at Dastarius's face, trying to read his cool expression to see if he was lying. With Dastarius, though, it was impossible to tell. The eerie situation still seemed unbelievable...but at the same time, it actually seemed like Dastarius was serious about the danger. On the off-chance he wasn't lying... shouldn't he trust his father? Or at least make him *think* Dash trusted him, so Dastarius would tell him more? After all...if the dark lion truly did know of some strange danger, he should try to find out about it. Not just for his sake, but for the sake of Saderia and his friends, as well.

Maybe if he pretended to trust Dastarius, he would tell him more. If he kept up the act long enough, maybe he would be able to uncover Dastarius's true motives and learn once and for all whether or not he was lying. All it would take was one slip-up for Dash to learn his real motives. And in the meantime, while he was acting and waiting to see if Dastarius would let slip something incriminating, Dash could learn more about this 'danger.' If it was actually something to worry about, he could use what Dastarius told him to help his friends. If not—if Dastarius really was just lying—no harm done, right?

Dastarius watched him closely, a knowing gleam in his amber eyes. "You don't believe me," he observed. "You don't trust me."

"Not really." Dash took a deep breath and forced himself to meet Dastarius's gaze. "But...maybe I could *try* to trust you."

Dastarius's eyes lit up and he smiled—at least, as much as Dastarius *could* smile. "Good," he replied, his voice smooth and pleased. "Then perhaps I will come speak to you another night. Say...tomorrow?"

Dash hesitated, then nodded uncomfortably. "Er...yeah, that would be fine." A twinge of apprehension burned in his chest at agreeing to his

request, but he ignored it.

“Good. I have to go now, but I will explain more next time. Good luck starting your journey with the Princess.” Dastarius rested his tail briefly on Dash’s shoulder and sneered when Dash jumped in surprise. Giving him a nod, Dastarius rose to his paws and turned to stalk into the shadowy woods, leaving Dash sitting alone in the center of the clearing. Before the dark lion disappeared in the shadows, he paused and glanced back over his shoulder, a dark, cautious expression on his face. “Oh...and Dash?”

Dash blinked and glanced up in surprise. “Yeah?”

Dastarius’s eyes narrowed and a grave shadow flitted across his face. “I’ll leave you with one warning...Saderia’s ‘spirit guide,’ Claw?” He paused and glanced back at the shadowed forest, then turned back and stared darkly into Dash’s eyes. “Let’s just say, I would always take what she says with a grain of salt, if I were you.”

Suspicion instantly gleamed in Dash’s eyes. Which spirit he was suspicious of, though, he didn’t know. “What do you mean?”

Dastarius coolly flicked his tail and turned around to leave. “I’ll explain another time. Until next time, my son.” Shaking out his pitch black mane, he stalked past the dark undergrowth on the edge of the clearing and vanished into the shadows of the woods. A second later, a wave of darkness crashed into the clearing, swallowing up the eerily lit land and dragging Dash down into unconsciousness once again.

Dash’s eyes flew open and he abruptly jerked upward in his bed, his eyes wide with shock and his heart pounding wildly. A shaky gasp escaped his mouth and his claws dug into the torn blue blanket laying half-on, half-off him. His chest shuddered with wild, heavy pants and his mind whirled with shock. The shadowed room around him slowly swirled into sight, making him shiver at the shadows draped across the darkened furniture. His head ached with confusion. What was going on? Was he back in the real world again?

“Dash?”

A yelp tore out of his throat at the sound of the soft voice and he jumped up so quickly, he nearly fell to the ground. Frantically, he spun around to see who was beside him. Expecting to see Dastarius, he felt a jolt

of shock race through him when his eyes fell on the fluffy orange animal standing beside his bed.

Saderia stood beside him, leaning close to him and studying him with narrowed, concerned amber eyes. “Dash? Are you okay?” She tipped her head to the side in bewilderment. “Did you have a nightmare or something?”

No words left Dash’s mouth. Bewildered, he merely stared at her in shock, uncomprehending. Slowly, reality started to return to him and his surroundings began to swim into focus. The strange, dream-like encounter with his father suddenly swirled through his mind like a movie reel on fast-forward, making his eyes widen in alarm and sending a wave of dizziness sweeping over him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized he was back in the real world. His room was around him. He lived with Saderia now, and Dastarius was dead and gone. Or should be, at least.

Taking a deep breath, Dash put a paw to his forehead and winced when it throbbed with pain. After the shock and confusion of seeing his dead father in his sleep, he felt exhausted. He still wasn’t sure if what he thought had happened had actually happened. Had he really seen Dastarius in a dream? Had he really spoken to him? Or was it just a creepy nightmare that had randomly come to him out of the blue?

Even as he wondered about it, a dark sense of dread rose in his chest. No, it couldn’t have been just a simple nightmare. The eerie dream had seemed so much realer. Any other dream would be fuzzy, murky, and nearly impossible to remember in the morning. This one was clear and still fresh in his mind even after waking up. The stunned emotions he had felt were realer, sharper, and lingered even after he awoke. And the animal in the clearing was definitely Dastarius. The creepy lion looked the same, sounded the same, and even smirked in the same creepy way Dash remembered. It was really him.

It had really happened.

A shiver of dread shuddered through him at the thought. Desperately, he tried to shake off the fear and clear his head. Blinking several times, he took a deep breath and slowly turned to face Saderia, realizing for the first time that she was in the room.

Saderia frowned when he turned to face her, narrowing her eyes in concern and probably wondering if he had lost his mind. “Dash?” she

murmured. "Are you okay?"

"I...I'm fine," he stammered, his thoughts still hazy and muddled. "What are you doing here, Princess..." He paused, then his eyes widened in shock when he realized what he had said. "Saderia!" he amended frantically. "I meant Saderia!" His eyes clouded with panic and his heart skipped a beat. Why in the world had that word slipped out?

Saderia narrowed her eyes and studied him curiously, a deep frown spreading across her face. Dash faced her nervously, nearly sweating with nervousness. What if she could read his mind and find out what had happened last night?

After a long moment of silence, Saderia flattened her ears in concern. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Dash nodded vigorously. "Uh huh. I'm great. Really."

Saderia blinked in surprise and studied him curiously, a worried look on her face.

Dash took a deep breath and nervously avoided her gaze, struggling to calm down and scanning the room as if searching for an escape. "What are you doing here anyway?"

Saderia frowned and slowly gestured to the window in his room with her tail. Out of the corner of his eye, Dash glanced at the window just long enough to see a few beams of light streaming in through the shattered glass.

"It's the crack of dawn," Saderia explained, watching him closely to see his reaction. "Remember? We were supposed to leave today?"

Dash blinked in surprise and glanced curiously back at the window. Outside, the forest was still shrouded in darkness, but a small glimmer of light had begun to rise on the horizon, casting a grayish light over the forest and turning the trees into tall shadows. Slowly, Saderia's words began to sink in. All the fur on Dash's back prickled in alarm and his eyes grew wide with dismay. After seeing his dead father in his sleep, now he had to go out with Saderia and his friends, pretend like everything was normal, and at the same time work up the courage to leave the forest to go on the journey to find Karenisha. The journey his father had just told him would mean his death if he left.

"This is not happening," he muttered under his breath, his heart skipping a beat.

Saderia frowned and studied him cautiously. "Is everything okay? You seem...jumpy."

Dash almost jumped at the sudden sound of her voice. Only through sheer force of will did he manage to control himself. Taking a deep breath, he tried to hide his fear and faced her as calmly as possible, all the while knowing that hiding the alarm in his eyes from Saderia was impossible. "Yeah, everything's fine," he murmured, grasping for words. "I'm just... nervous...about...the journey." That was it.

Her gaze softened with sympathy. "Oh...I get it. It'll be fine, though, I promise."

"Yeah, I know..." He trailed off and guiltily avoided her eyes. Why was he lying?

Saderia rested her tail gently on his shoulder, making him wince internally. "It will be fine. You'll see. We're all going to be fine."

"Okay." Dash looked away and unconsciously shrugged her tail off his shoulder, feeling a dark sense of guilt sweep over him. Everything he had said to her had been a lie...Well, sort of. After having an unexplained death threat placed over his head by none other than his dead, ghostly father, he *was* just a bit concerned about the journey.

Saderia blinked in surprise and felt a twinge of sadness when she saw him pull away from her. Confusion clouded her eyes. Why was Dash suddenly acting so strange? The dark lion had seemed normal yesterday. Shaking her head, she pushed the thoughts away and sighed. Like he said, Dash was probably just nervous about the journey. Maybe he was starting to panic. If so, she could hardly blame him.

Letting out a soft breath, she faced him with kind, sympathetic amber eyes and tried to hide her own unease. "Well...I've already got the bags packed with food. I'll go get them now. You stay here and try to... wake up more." She paused, then offered him a weak smile. "It really will be fine, though. I promise."

"Okay," Dash muttered, his voice colder than he intended. "I believe you."

Saderia's smile wilted at his harsh tone and she looked uncomfortably down at her paws, wondering why he was acting so strange and...distant. Shaking the thoughts away, she heaved a soft sigh. "Okay..."

She paused awkwardly, then slowly started to back out of the room, pushing past the cracked door. "I'll come get you in a few minutes..."

The soft click of the door behind her made Dash look up, his amber eyes dark and clouded with pain and guilt. Why had he been so cold to Saderia? Why had he lied to her in the first place? Wasn't he past that by now? Letting out a low groan, he put a paw to his forehead and sighed. Today was going to be a long day.

Silence fell over the room. Without Saderia around to distract him, memories of his strange meeting with Dastarius flooded Dash's mind. His eyes narrowed with unease. Maybe he should just tell Saderia about the meeting. After all, she of all animals would understand that sometimes ghosts visited the living completely out of the blue and it had nothing whatsoever to do with him. It wasn't as if he had wanted to see Dastarius. Besides, wasn't it wrong to keep it a secret from her when Dastarius was her most dangerous enemy? Even if he had only appeared in a Dream, she had a right to know.

What if she didn't understand, though? What if the idea of the meeting shocked and scared her? He hadn't exactly *asked* Dastarius to visit him, but what if she didn't understand that? What if she thought that by meeting with Dastarius—even if against his will—he could no longer be trusted? What if she started to distrust him again or even hate him? At the very least, she might tell him to never talk to Dastarius again. Normally, he wouldn't exactly mind that, but if he wasn't allowed to speak to Dastarius again, he would never find out *why* the dark lion had visited him and what he had been 'warning' him about. Then what would happen if the danger he had told him about was real? What if something happened to his friends because he hadn't been able to visit Dastarius again and learn what the danger was? What if his friends *died* because of it?

His mind whirled with desperate thoughts. Maybe he could visit Dastarius just one more time. Tomorrow, he could get Dastarius to tell him what the danger was. After that, Dash would never have to speak to him again. Once he learned what the danger was, he could tell Saderia about Dastarius and what he had learned and let her decide if the danger was real. If he actually knew what the danger was, she would probably understand. She wouldn't be mad at him for trying to keep her safe. She couldn't be.

Dash heaved a long sigh, but felt a dull sense of determination and resolution burn in his chest. Just one more visit with the creepy lion, just to learn about the danger...That seemed the best course of action. Until he learned what the danger was, though, Saderia wouldn't hear a word of it. That way, when he finally did tell her, he would also be able to tell her about the danger and reassure her that he had had a good reason for talking to Dastarius. The plan seemed decent. Still, a sense of guilt haunted Dash's mind...

Pushing his guilt away, Dash turned his thoughts to the journey and felt a shiver race down his spine. Was he really about to step right into the danger Dastarius had told him about? That couldn't be true...Even if there was danger, they wouldn't find it immediately. After all, Dastarius must have known that they had planned to leave that day and he would have warned Dash earlier if he thought they would encounter danger on the first day. Wouldn't he? Dash had no idea. He never had any idea when it came to Dastarius. If Dastarius had warned him in the first place, though, he wouldn't just let him die...right?

Maybe the whole journey was a bad idea. Even if they didn't die on the first day, danger would still be waiting for them. He and his friends would find it sooner or later. Maybe they shouldn't go at all...Then again, Dastarius hadn't said he shouldn't go, just that there would be danger. Besides...even if he *had*, Dash doubted he could convince Saderia to give up the journey. In the end, the decision wasn't his to make.

Dash heaved a sigh and shook the thoughts from his head, knowing he was thinking in circles. What a mess...Before he could agonize any more over Saderia, Dastarius, the journey, and whatever other problems might get thrown into the mix, the door creaked open and Saderia poked her head around the side to peer into his room.

"Dash?" she called, her voice soft and hesitant.

Dash looked up slowly. Dread kindled in his chest. "Is it time to go?"

Saderia nodded, her eyes glowing with determination. "Yes. It's time."

Chapter Ten

The Plan

The time had come. Now for the hard part...The thought of sneaking out through the window flitted through Saderia's mind until she realized how unnecessary that would be. As long as they were quiet, the front door would work perfectly fine. Taking a deep breath, Saderia shook off her fears and turned to stalk out of Dash's room with her friend close beside her. Together, they crept out through the cracked door and let it click shut behind them. The shadowed hallway leading to the front room opened up before them.

Darkness crashed over them the instant they shut the door. Blinking to see through the blackness, Saderia gingerly passed a yellow food pack to Dash. The dark lion took the pack silently and draped it over his shoulder, avoiding her gaze. A strange aura of nervousness seemed to haunt the lion, bringing a frown to Saderia's face. Something was wrong with him... Maybe it was just nerves or something that would wear off when they took their first steps on their journey...but what if it was something else?

Heaving a sigh, Saderia shook the thoughts out of her head and turned to creep down the shadowed hallway. If something truly was bothering Dash, he would tell her. The two of them always told each other everything. Pushing the thoughts away, she slunk down the silent hallway and crept out into the rubble-ridden front room. Dash followed silently, keeping his eyes on his paws. Shadows danced across the walls as Saderia pushed open the front door. A gust of cold air swept in, rustling her fur and sending shivers through her. Moonlight filtered into the darkened room and a wild, woodsy scent drifted inside. Hanging in the black sky was the full moon, seeming to light the way.

With a soft sigh, Saderia stepped out of the house and crept out onto the cold, shadowed grass, her friend close behind her. The instant Dash joined her on the frosty ground, she turned and closed the door silently behind her, feeling a pang of regret.

“Goodbye, Dad,” she whispered, closing her eyes. Taking a deep breath, Saderia forced herself to turn away from the door and signaled for Dash to follow her. The two darted across the cold grass, their paws silent and their icy breath quiet. Bushes rustled on the edge of the woods when they reached the dirt path. A second later, Dingo and Jeb stepped out from the undergrowth, shaking leaves out of their fur and hurrying over to them when they spotted them. Fear and unease glimmered in Jeb’s eyes, but the tiny creature tried to keep his head held high. Beside him, Dingo couldn’t have looked happier. His light brown eyes glowed with excitement and his tail twitched with impatience.

The desert canine eagerly pricked his ears. “Are you two ready to go?”

Saderia couldn’t help but smile as she handed them food packs. “Yes. Are you?”

Dingo snorted and grinned. “I was ready ages ago.”

Beside him, Jeb nodded shakily, his wide eyes betraying his fear.

A soft, tired sigh escaped Saderia’s chest, but her eyes glowed with determination. “Then let’s go.”

When her friends nodded in agreement, she turned and stalked onto the shadowed dirt path, taking the lead. Behind her, her friends fell into step with her, their paws silent on the dusty old path. A cool wind breezed past them as they crept into the shadows, filling Saderia’s nose with the earthy scent of the forest for the last time. Her eyes gleamed with excitement despite her exhaustion and she didn’t look back at her home. Seconds later, a strange, icy feeling swept over her and she smiled when she sensed a ghostly presence fall into step behind her, knowing Claw had decided to accompany them to the edge of the forest. Unbeknownst to her blissfully ignorant friends, the spirit followed them in the shadows. Without having to look back, Saderia could feel it.

Determination burned in her chest. All her friends were with her, starting their new journey together. Claw, the ghost with everyone’s best interests at heart; Jeb, the fearful but loyal creature; Dingo, the desert dog who would fight for his friends despite his dark façade; and Dash, her closest friend, the one she could always turn to for help. Her best friend. Nothing could ever tear them apart. Not even the journey ahead.

“Saderia! Dash! Breakfast!” Makero’s voice echoed through the sleepy house. The King stood in the cracked archway leading into the dining room, peering down into the shadowed hallway that led to Saderia and Dash’s rooms. Dusty morning sunlight drifted in through the cracks in the walls, casting a bright light across Makero’s tired face.

“Makero?” Cia looked up from where she sat at the dusty gold table in the dining room. Sleepiness haunted her blue eyes. “Are they still sleeping?”

He glanced at the hallway and frowned. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll go check.”

When Cia nodded and turned tiredly back to her food, Makero took a deep breath. His paws tingled with a strange sense of dread and a shiver raced down his spine as he crept into the dusty right hallway. The strange feelings made his eyes narrow with unease. Maybe he had started to acquire Saderia’s special senses. Either way, something was off.

Silently, he crept down the hallway and paused in front of Saderia and Dash’s closed doors. He hesitated, then carefully knocked on the cracked wood of Saderia’s bedroom door. No answer. A dull sense of dread rose in his chest. Taking a deep breath, Makero slowly pressed against the door and cracked it open slightly, dreading what he might find inside but trying to prepare for what he already suspected had happened. Silently, he poked his head into the room and felt the breath leave his chest. The room was completely empty. The bed was abandoned, the blanket tucked neatly over the mattress. On top of the neat bed was Saderia’s diary. A torn piece of paper with Saderia’s neat handwriting lay beside it.

Dismay rose in Makero’s chest and pain swept over him, leaving him feeling cold and empty. It had happened. The note was right in front of him. All he could do now was read it. Taking a deep breath, he crept toward the bed and picked up the torn paper. His paws shook as he read the short note and his eyes gleamed with pain. It was just as he thought.

Knowing what had happened was hard enough. Having it confirmed by nothing but a crumpled note written in his daughter’s handwriting was worse.

Desert sunlight shone in the light blue sky, sending waves of heat down on Saderia’s back. Her paws trudged tiredly through the hot sand and

her head drooped with exhaustion, but her eyes glowed with determination. Save for Claw, each of her friends tramped along beside her, Dingo eagerly leading the way with Dash and Jeb struggling to keep up. The canine's eyes glowed with excitement and he held his head high, seeming unaffected by exhaustion. Behind him, Dash struggled to keep moving, his eyes distant and his movements stiff and jumpy. Fear haunted Jeb's face as he struggled to keep up, as well.

The brilliant green trees of the forest had disappeared behind them hours ago. Nothing but sand dunes could be seen for miles. Heat seemed to simmer up from the endless dunes, blurring the line between the ground and the light blue sky. No matter how many steps they took, the sand seemed to spread out even farther. If Saderia didn't know better, she would have thought the sand went on forever. As it was, they had a long way to go.

A dull, painful sense of loss burned in Saderia's heart as she thought of her forest. In the back of her mind, she knew she would return, but the feeling lingered. Even if leaving her forest was only temporary, somehow it felt as if she was leaving behind the ideal of her home forever. How many times had she traveled the world, faced with perils and uncertainty? After finding herself on the road so many times, travel itself had become her home. No matter where she was, she felt comfortable traveling with her friends. She didn't need the forest to have a home anymore. The part of her that had grown up believing her forest was the only place in the world was gone. Suddenly, she felt much older. Her adventures seemed to have changed everything. Vaguely, she wondered how much would change by the time this one was over.

"Cia! Jash! Your dinner's getting cold!" Makero sat alone at the dusty gold dining table, staring down at a plate full of food with dull, clouded green eyes, not really seeing it. His voice was calm but empty.

Cia and Jash stood by the wall beside the cracked archway that led into the dining room, their blue eyes narrowed with concern. Pressed up against the dirty wall, Cia peeked discreetly around the side of the archway and studied her brother-in-law intently, her eyes glowing with worry. When the King started to look up from his plate, she frantically pulled away from the archway and dove back behind the wall beside Jash. The last thing she wanted was to be caught spying on Makero in his own house.

A heavy sigh escaped Cia's chest when Makero turned back to stare at his food. "I'm really starting to worry about him," she hissed, her eyes narrowed with unease. "He's just sitting there...so calm...even though he just found out Saderia left this morning!" Her tail flicked irritably in distress. "Am I the only one who's concerned about this?"

Jash flicked her sharply with his tail. "Shh! He'll hear you!" When Cia flattened her ears indignantly, he sighed. "I'm worried, too, but I'm sure he must be just as concerned as we are."

"Then why does he seem so calm?" Her eyes shone with confusion. "It's strange."

Jash shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. But we're *not* going to say anything to him, okay? It's his life and his children. He can deal with it however he wants."

Cia lashed her tail. "It just bothers me!"

Jash sighed and gave her a long look. "Promise me you won't say anything to him."

Cia rolled her eyes and looked away. "Fine. I promise."

In the dining room, Makero kept his eyes trained on the food, ignoring the hushed voices he could hear on the other side of the wall. "Cia!" he called. "Jash!" Somewhere on the other side of the wall, he heard the two of them jump in surprise. A second later, they crept hastily into the room, keeping close together and eyeing him nervously.

Cia quickly sat down in the fancy chair across from Makero and looked away. "Sorry. We, uh, didn't hear you call us."

Makero barely seemed to hear her. "Okay," he murmured, his green eyes dull.

Cia cast a glance at him out of the corner of her eye, then quickly looked down to fidget with her food. Her eyes flicked upward when Jash sat down beside her. She paused while her husband sat down and eyed Makero nervously. Before she could stop herself, the words blurted out of her mouth. "Aren't you worried about Saderia and Dash?"

Just as soon as he had sat down, Jash instantly threw his paws in the air and leapt out of his chair. "I'll be in the living room," he muttered, giving Cia an annoyed scowl and stepping away from the table. "I want no part of this."

Cia shot him a glare, then turned anxiously back to Makero, fidgeting nervously.

Makero picked at his food and shrugged. "Of course I am." He paused, then gazed thoughtfully at his plate. "Which neighborhood do you think we should check today?"

Cia gaped at him in disbelief. "Your children are missing and that's all you can say?"

He shrugged, his voice unnervingly calm. "They'll be okay. They always are. In the meantime, it's my job to repair the forest so that when they return, they'll be returning to a home they remember. Karenisha will be happy to see that nothing's changed, too."

Cia frowned. "How can you be so sure they'll return? I think you're putting too much faith in her."

"And I think you're not putting enough faith in her." The King's dull, sad green eyes flicked up to her face, then returned to the plate. "No matter what, Saderia won't stop until she does what she set out to do."

A shadow crossed Cia's face. "That might be the problem."

Makero's eyes narrowed and flicked up to hers. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Cia's eyes flashed and she pointedly looked away. "It doesn't matter. You think they'll come back with Karenisha, and maybe you're right."

Makero stared at her, anger creeping into his eyes. "You think Karenisha's gone."

Cia sighed. "She left, Makero. She thinks we're dead. What am I supposed to think? That she'll walk up to Saderia and say, 'Oh, hi, I was waiting for you to find me'?"

Makero narrowed his eyes defensively. "It might not be *easy* for them to find her, but they can still do it. They found *me*, didn't they?"

"Yes, but..."

"They found me even when I was in a human camp," Makero growled, his eyes flashing. "*Humans* were there, and they still saved me and survived. They will find her."

Cia lashed her tail. "Aren't you even the least bit worried about your daughter? What you say might be true, but that was dangerous! Who knows

how many dangers they might encounter! How can you be sure they'll survive every one of them?"

The chair scraped back as Makero leapt to his paws, his eyes flaming with fury. "Are you suggesting that I don't care what happens to Saderia? That I don't spend every second wondering if she's in trouble? That I don't hope every time I hear a sound that it will be the door opening?" His eyes flashed. "I knew she was going to leave a long time ago and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop her. What exactly would you like me to do now? I can't go to the desert to look for her—I'll end up lost, the forest will lose its King, and Saderia will have no one to come home to. At this point, the only things I can do are take care of the forest and keep my faith in Saderia, the only things she asked for." His eyes blazed. "So yes, I am worried about my daughter. How dare you suggest otherwise?"

With one quick flick of his paw, he slammed the chair up to the table and instantly stalked away, leaving Cia sitting in silence. A second later, he disappeared into the hallway. His food remained sitting on the table, untouched.

A long sigh sounded from the living room, making Cia look up quickly. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Jash standing in the archway leading to the living room.

Her husband gave her a long, knowing look. "I told you not to..."

"Don't." Cia held up a paw and shook her head. "Don't even say 'I told you so.'"

Pure darkness met Dash the instant his eyes fluttered open. Alarm shot through him as he gazed around at his dark surroundings. Slowly, an eerie clearing took shape from the shadows. Cold, dry grass illuminated by an otherworldly glow appeared and tall, shadowed trees rose up around him, outlining the edges of the clearing. The shadows retreated to the woods surrounding the clearing, hiding behind skeletal trees.

Dash gazed around at the dream clearing with stunned amber eyes, his heart beating faster. The fur on his back rose up in alarm when he realized where he was. Dastarius would be hiding somewhere around there, waiting for their meeting. Gritting his teeth, he scanned the cold, empty area in front of him for any sign of his father, then froze in alarm when something tapped him softly on the shoulder. A cry of fear escaped Dash's

throat. Bristling in terror, he whipped around and gasped in shock when he saw who had tapped him.

Dastarius sat right behind him, his black-tipped tail suspended in midair. The dark lion raised an eyebrow in amusement. “Did I startle you?”

Dash let out a shaky gasp and tried to slow the beating of his heart. “Kind of...”

Dastarius heaved an annoyed sigh. “Then I have my work cut out for me.”

Forcing himself to sit back and calm down, Dash flattened his ears and glared. “You know, if you want me to trust you, it might help if you didn’t sneak up on me.”

An amused smirk crossed Dastarius’s face. “I’ll keep that in mind.” When Dash narrowed his eyes and lashed his tail in annoyance, Dastarius simply flicked his tail and gazed absently around at the clearing. “I see you’ve started your journey.”

“Yes.” Dash scowled at him and impatiently flicked his tail. “And it would really help if you could tell me what kind of danger I should be looking out for.”

Dastarius chuckled softly. “Dash, I didn’t warn you so that you would spend your whole journey in fear. I simply wanted to make sure you would be prepared.”

Dash shot him a dry glare. “You can *really* make sure I’ll be prepared if you just tell me what this is about.”

Dastarius flicked his tail lightly to wave his words away. “All in good time, son.”

Dash hissed and scowled. “Why can’t you just tell me now?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Tell me something, Dash. If I told you what this danger was, would you keep it to yourself and stay on the lookout, or would you tell Princess?”

Dash blinked in surprise, then narrowed his eyes uneasily. Ignoring a shiver at hearing Saderia called ‘Princess,’ he looked away uncomfortably. How exactly was he supposed to answer that? Or how *should* he answer it? Obviously he would tell Saderia, but Dastarius probably didn’t want to hear that. On the other hand, if he tried to tell his father he *wouldn’t* tell Saderia...well, who was he kidding? Dastarius would know it was a lie.

Dastarius's eyes gleamed knowingly. "Think carefully about your answer, son."

Annoyance gleamed in Dash's eyes and he flattened his ears. Why was it that everyone seemed able to read his mind? Shaking it off, he paused, then took a deep breath and nervously met his gaze. "I guess...at first...I might just keep it to myself."

"You're lying," Dastarius growled, cutting him off and giving him a stern glare.

Embarrassment rose in Dash's chest and his face burned with equal amounts of humiliation and annoyance. He couldn't even pull off a tiny little lie? A shiver of fear raced through him when he caught his father's cold glance and he unconsciously took a step back, his fur beginning to bristle. Would his father be angry that he had lied to him?

Dastarius raised an eyebrow at his fearful display, then heaved a weary sigh. "Dash, if we're ever going to be able to trust each other enough for me to help you, it would help if you didn't lie to me." He paused, then sneered. "Or at least try to."

Dash flattened his ears and shot him a dry glare. "I'll keep that in mind."

A faint sneer curled up the corners of Dastarius's mouth. "Touché." The dark lion hesitated, then rose smoothly to his paws and stepped closer to Dash until his paws were only inches away from his son's, both of them strong and the same dark shade of brown.

Dash glanced at their paws, then quickly looked away. Even if Dastarius was trying to help him, Dash didn't want to see any resemblance between himself and his father. Hiding a shiver, he forced himself to meet Dastarius's gaze, not wanting to look as intimidated as he felt. "Okay, fine. I would probably tell her. But why wouldn't I? She's my friend, even if you don't like it. If you're really trying to help me, why wouldn't you want me to tell Saderia?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Unless this is all some plan to get her killed!"

Dastarius heaved a weary sigh. "Dash, I'll be honest. I couldn't care less whether the Princess lives or dies. The only thing I care about is helping you. For that reason, I don't want the Princess to get herself killed because she'll drag you down with her. That is why I don't want you to tell

her about this danger. If she knows about it, she'll probably go looking for it and drag you along with her. And then, most likely, you will both die."

Dash flattened his ears. "Saderia's smarter than that! She would make a good plan to deal with it. She wouldn't just rush into it!"

Dastarius rolled his eyes and let out a tired breath. "I wish I could believe that, son, but I'm afraid her record speaks for itself. She has a habit of rushing into things, and though she may have gotten around some obstacles in the past, this one is trickier."

"She can handle it," Dash growled. "And if she does try to rush into it, I'll stop her."

Dastarius rolled his eyes and snickered. "Like she would listen to you."

Dash scowled. "What's that supposed to mean? She always listens to me!"

"Really?" Dastarius scornfully raised an eyebrow. "Did she listen to you when you tried to stop her from going to Twisted Creek Woods back when the hunters roamed the forest? Did she listen to you at all when she thought that canine creature was dead?"

Dash winced and looked away, seething over the fact that his father seemed to know everything about his life. "Well...maybe she doesn't listen *sometimes*, but..."

"She listens to you when it's convenient for her," Dastarius interrupted, his eyes flashing in the dim light. "She won't listen to you now. It's not the right time."

Anger burned in Dash's eyes and he glared at Dastarius. "What does that mean?"

"It means what it means." Dastarius coolly flicked his tail. "The Princess went through a dark time when she believed the canine to be dead, did she not? During that time, she lost her sense of leadership. Now that she's recovered, she'll want to regain that sense. Since it's crucial for her to step up and become the leader she once was, *she* will be making all of the decisions. She won't lean on you again, not when she's trying to prove to everyone and to herself that she is a leader. Your advice won't be welcome."

Dash flattened his ears in annoyance and let out a low, angry growl. "That was in the past, okay? She's over all that now. Stop throwing the past

back in my face!”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. “It was my understanding that the Princess herself holds the philosophy that sometimes the past can influence the future. I’m merely giving my thoughts in accordance with her own theory.” When Dash gritted his teeth and glared daggers at him, Dastarius sneered. “Anyway, if you truly believe that once the Princess hears about the danger, she *won’t* rush into it and get herself killed...well, perhaps you’re right. But...” A dark shadow flitted across his face. “When she finds out *who* is waiting for her in the midst of that danger, can you promise me the same thing?”

A frown spread across Dash’s face and the anger in his eyes faded into a look of bewilderment. “What do you mean? Who’s waiting for her?”

“Someone she would be very happy to find.” Dastarius’s eyes glowed knowingly, but his face remained shadowed and grim. “Someone she’s missed for quite a while.”

Dash blinked in surprise and gazed at him in confusion, then felt a frigid cold suddenly sweep over him, freezing him in place. A dark sense of understanding trickled into his mind, making his eyes open wide with shock. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and he darkly looked up at Dastarius, his eyes shadowed. “You know where Karenisha is.”

A faint sneer crossed his face. “Naturally.”

Dash’s ears flattened. “Where is she? We need to find her!”

Dastarius’s icy eyes flashed with frustration. “Were you not listening? If you don’t live to bring her home, then what’s the point? The Queen is being guarded very closely by her captors. There’s no plan the Princess could make that would even get you close to her, much less get her out alive.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Dash gritted his teeth and gazed at his father with wild, desperate eyes. “We can’t just leave her!”

Dastarius sighed. “I know. That’s why I’m trying to help you.”

Dash’s eyes narrowed. “But you just said there was no plan we could make...”

“There *isn’t* a decent plan you could make. Right now.” Dastarius’s eyes narrowed and he gave Dash a firm glare. “Things change. Right now, the only thing we can do is wait to see what happens. If something changes, then we’ll decide what to do.”

“That’s *it*?” Dash gaped at him in horror and disbelief. “No, there’s got to be something else we can do! Tell me where she is! I’ll think of something!”

“No.” Dastarius icily flicked his tail. “I will not allow you to get yourself killed.”

Dash lashed his tail in fury. “I can’t just sit back and do nothing if Karenisha’s in trouble! That’s the whole reason we began this journey!”

“I know,” Dastarius replied, his tone irritatingly calm. “That’s why I’m making a plan of my own. I can see everything that’s going on in the living world, so I’ll probably be able to make an accurate guess at what will happen in the future. I do know this—if you keep up your journey, you might not find the Queen, but you will find some animals who could help you find her...in a roundabout way. It might not seem that way at first, but unless you meet these animals, you have next to no chance of ever seeing Karenisha alive.”

Frustration burned in Dash’s eyes. Why did Dastarius always have to talk in riddles and never give any clear answers? Why did this have to be so *confusing*? Pushing away his annoyance, he took a deep breath and struggled to organize his thoughts. The thought of using any plan of Dastarius’s disturbed him, but he didn’t have much choice but to work with him until he got a clear answer. He sighed. “Who do I need to find?”

Dastarius carelessly flicked his tail. “Oh, you’ll meet them soon enough, I’m sure. If you keep up this journey, you’ll find them. As long as you keep your eyes open.”

Dash let out an exasperated sigh. “Would it kill you to give me a clear answer?”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow, making Dash’s face grow hot with embarrassment when he realized what he had said. “Er...sorry...I didn’t mean to say...you know, *kill*, and...never mind.” He took a deep breath. “I guess I can...*remotely* see why you can’t tell me where Karenisha is, but I don’t see why you can’t tell me who I need to find.”

Dastarius shrugged. “If I told you, you would overreact when you found them and immediately start questioning them, something that would hardly endear them to you. The animals you need to find are in a delicate situation, one you’ll need to ease into to get them to trust you. I can’t have you mucking up the plan.”

Dash flattened his ears in indignation. "I wouldn't do that!"

"Maybe not." Dastarius flicked his tail calmly, as if he didn't care either way. "Nonetheless, I'm still not telling you. Consider it a simple precaution. Trust me. I know a bit more than you do about how to get someone to talk."

Dash blinked in surprise, then took a nervous step back when he saw the dark, eerie glint in Dastarius's eyes. "You make it sound like we're doing something bad."

Dastarius blinked in surprise. "Something bad? Of course not. We're simply trying to get the Queen back. Sometimes you have to be sneaky to get the information you need."

A suspicious frown crossed Dash's face. "I don't like this. This doesn't make sense."

"Oh?" Dastarius raised an eyebrow, both in interest and amusement. "How so?"

Dash stared at him in disbelief. "Uh...first of all, why would you *ever* help me find Karenisha? You hate her almost as much as you hate Saderia! Maybe more."

Dastarius flicked his tail nonchalantly. "Perhaps. But like I said, I'm concerned with preserving your life, not theirs. I know you won't rest until you have found the Queen, so the sooner I help you find her, the sooner you get out of danger."

Dash's tail twitched anxiously across the leaf-strewn ground and his eyes narrowed in disbelief, but he simply nodded and looked away. Nothing made any sense. It was still hard—if not impossible—for him to believe that Dastarius actually wanted to help him or have anything to do with him, but he wasn't exactly in a place to question.

Dastarius met Dash's gaze with knowing amber eyes. "I know you want more information, son. But just leave this to me. You may not like what I did in the past, but you have to admit that if there's one thing I'm good at, it's making convoluted plans." When Dash bitterly avoided his gaze and said nothing, Dastarius sternly met his eyes. "I know this is the last thing you want to do. But you're just going to have to trust me."

Dash glanced at him, then quickly looked away, his eyes distrustful. "Sure," he muttered, his voice tinged with disbelief.

Dastarius let out a weary sigh. "I know it will be difficult. But you'll soon see that I'm only trying to help you." The dark lion paused and glanced at the shadowed woods before turning back to Dash. "It's time for me to go. Should we meet again tomorrow night?"

Dash's eyes narrowed and lingered on his paws, their amber depths clouded with thought. After that night's meeting, he still hadn't learned what the danger was nor what Dastarius's ulterior motive could be. The only thing he had gotten was more desperate to find out what was going on. One more meeting...just to figure out what was going on. Heaving a sigh, he reluctantly met Dastarius's gaze. "All right. We'll talk tomorrow."

A faint smile spread across his face. "Good. I'll see you then." The dark lion rose smoothly to his paws and started to turn to stalk toward the woods. "Don't be so fearful while you're on your journey," he called lightly over his shoulder. "At least not when you've only just started. I'll tell you if something bad is about to happen."

Dash narrowed his eyes and sharply flicked his tail. "Or Saderia will."

"Or Saderia will," Dastarius agreed, his tone light. With a flick of his tail, he stalked into the shadows of the woods. Seconds later, darkness swept over the clearing and washed over Dash, dragging him out of the clearing and back into unconsciousness.

"We cannot go on like this." A desperate voice rang out through the darkness, echoing in Saderia's ears. Her eyes blinked open and a gasp of shock escaped her throat. Darkness surrounded her, but as she gazed helplessly at the shadowed area around her, the blackness slowly started to fade. Endless, rolling dunes of sand appeared before her, shadowed with darkness. The blackness retreated to the sky where only a few weak stars glowed in the distance. Shadows covered the desert. Blinking in surprise, Saderia looked up at the horizon and felt her heart stop in horror and disbelief.

An enormous rock formation rose up out of the sand dunes, towering high in the sky, stark black in the darkness. Huge rocks stacked one on top of the other rose up to a long, craggy platform that towered over the dunes, casting an ominous shadow over the sand. Jutting boulders shot out of the formation like deadly spikes and a vague mess of stones formed a

den at the back of the platform. On the edge of the platform, a shadowed, dark brown figure stood gazing out at the desert. In a flash, he threw back his head and let out a long, haunting howl. So focused on the shadowed figure at the edge of the rock, Saderia didn't notice two darker figures lurking behind him in the shadows of the den.

Suddenly, darkness swept over the scene and the ground gave out beneath her. A terrified scream tore out of her chest as she plummeted through the blackness, unable to catch herself. Out of the shadows, the craggy platform suddenly appeared and her paws struck the crumbling edge. Her claws dug into the stone, but the rest of her body dangled dangerously over open air. Desperately, she scrabbled at the stone, struggling to pull herself up. Daring to look down, she gazed down at the sand and felt her heart stop in horror.

The sand was gone. An ocean of dark blood spread out below her, pooling around the spiked bottom of the formation and spilling out across the dunes. Bodies floated in the scarlet waters, covered in wounds. Canines splashed frantically through the thick blood, struggling to save themselves but slipping deeper under the waves every second. Near the bottom of the formation, a blurred brown figure struggled to pull the shadows out of the gore and nearly slipped under himself. Saderia's stomach lurched with horror, but her eyes jerked upward when a growl sounded above her. Terror swept over her the instant she looked up.

Dark paws clamped roughly down on her own as a shadowed figure leaned over her, letting out a low growl. Fear washed over her like the bloody waves below, but a deeper sense of betrayal sliced through her heart, making her feel weak. A darker figure hovered behind the one holding her paws, leering down at her. Gore dripped from his fangs, streaming down the rocks of the monstrous den and filling the cruel red lake below her. Blood spilled out from the hazy figure holding her down, as well, but instead of oozing off of sharp fangs, the thick gore poured out from some deep, invisible wound on his shadowed chest, splattering the rocks and drowning the animals below.

Claws drove into her paws and a scream tore out of her throat. Seconds before the scene turned black, a cold, dangerous voice whispered in her ear. "Kill her. Kill her now."

Chapter Eleven

Spirits

Saderia's eyes flew open and she jerked upward frantically, her heart skipping a beat. Shakily, she staggered to her paws and looked around with a weak gasp, her eyes wide with terror. Slowly, her surroundings came into view. Sunlight shimmered down from the cloudless light blue sky, casting yellow light down on the sand dunes. All around her, her friends slept peacefully on the ground, their breathing soft and even. The instant she saw them, though, her vision blurred and all she could see were the lifeless bodies of her friends floating in the giant ocean of blood. With a shaky gasp, she shook her head and snapped back to reality. The vision vanished and the desert looked normal once again. Still, a cold sense of fear and disquiet lingered despite the heat of the desert.

Letting out a shaky breath, she sat back on the hot ground, her mind whirling and her heart pounding with fear. The dream had been one of the most horrifying nightmares she had had in a long time. Only it wasn't an ordinary nightmare. The terrifying images she had seen had been part of a Dream, one of her special powers that showed her the future.

A shiver raced down Saderia's spine. With eyes clouded with fear, she quickly turned around and leaned over the still body of her friend, giving him a frantic shake. "Dash! Dash, wake up."

Dash's eyelids fluttered a few times, then finally opened to slits after she poked him in the side about ten more times. Blinking rapidly, he squinted up at the shining sun, then lazily rolled onto his side, his eyes clouded and tired. "Saderia?" A soft yawn escaped his mouth as he tiredly pushed himself up into a sitting position. "What's going on? Did I sleep too late or something?"

"No." She winced and her eyes clouded. "I just...had a really creepy Dream."

Dash's ears pricked up in surprise. "Really?" Seeing the haunted look in her eyes, he rested his tail sympathetically on her shoulder. "What

was it about?”

Saderia heaved a sigh and looked uncomfortably down at her paws. “It’s complicated. Maybe we should wait for Dingo and Jeb to wake up so I can tell them, too.”

Dash blinked, then glanced down at the sleeping form of Dingo close beside him. A faint sneer crossed his face. With a mischievous gleam in his amber eyes, he leaned down and gave Dingo a sharp jab in the side. “Hey! Wake up!”

Dingo’s head shot up in alarm and he frantically leapt to his paws, his fur bristling and his eyes wide with shock. “What the...?” The desert canine looked around wildly and dug his claws deep into the sand, as if preparing for a fight. Bewilderment gleamed in his light brown eyes when he saw that no one was attacking. Blinking in surprise, he swung around to face Dash with a stunned, disbelieving expression. “Did *you* do that?”

Dash shrugged and tried to bite back a snicker. “You looked too peaceful.”

Dingo glared at him and let out a low growl. “If I were any dingo but me, you would be dead right now!”

Dash grinned and laughed. “Yeah, I know. Luckily, you’re you.”

Dingo narrowed his eyes and lashed his tail, but a playful grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “On second thought, I think I will strangle you!” Before Dash could react, Dingo lunged toward him, sending him sprawling to the ground with a cry of surprise.

“Guys!” Saderia gaped at them in shock and tried to hide the amusement in her eyes as the two of them rolled across the ground in a playful fight, swatting at each other and letting out light-hearted growls.

A few paces away from them, Jeb’s head shot up in alarm and he frantically stumbled to his paws, his eyes wide with terror from the sounds of fighting. Alarm and bewilderment gleamed in his blue/green irises when he spotted Dash and Dingo rolling across the ground. “What’s going on?”

Saderia rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, Jeb. They’re not fighting seriously.”

“Says you!” Dingo let out a laugh and grinned as he shoved Dash to the ground and pinned him down. Seconds later, Dash kicked him aside with a playful chuckle, sending the canine stumbling to the ground, laughing the whole time. “Okay,” he relented, laying back against the sand

with a grin. "Maybe it wasn't a serious fight. Because if it was, I would have pinned you a long time ago!"

Dash glared at him in mock indignation. "Yeah right! I could pin you any day!"

"Name the time and place!" Dingo retorted, leaping to his paws with a bright grin and giving Dash a playful flick of his tail. When the dark lion just rolled his eyes and grinned, Dingo laughed and shook his head. Together, the two of them shook the sand out of their fur and padded toward Saderia, pushing each other at every step. Saderia rolled her eyes, but couldn't help but smile when the two of them sat down in front of her next to Jeb.

"So what's going on?" Dingo asked, tipping his head to the side and letting the exhilaration in his eyes fade away. "Are we trying to get a head start or something?"

"No," Dash replied, taking on a more serious tone of voice. "Saderia just had a Dream. I think it's important."

"Ah." Dingo's eyes narrowed grimly with understanding. "We're all ears."

Saderia bit her lip. "It was really scary. I don't want to ruin your good spirits."

Dingo shrugged lightly. "Well, if it makes you feel any better, I could beat up Dash again after you tell us what your Dream was about."

Dash shot him a glare and tried to hide a playful grin.

Rolling her eyes, Saderia stifled a giggle and gave them a faint smile. "All right. If you really want to know..." Taking a deep breath, she faced her three friends as confidently as possible and launched into a description of her latest Dream. Her eyes clouded with fear as she described the eerie rock formation and a shiver raced down her spine when she told them about the angry red lake of blood. Confusion clouded her friends' eyes as she told them about the eerie, bleeding figures she had seen at the end of her Dream and the creepy voice she had heard.

Silence fell over them as soon as she finished speaking. Each of her friends exchanged a long, uneasy glance, their eyes clouded with bewilderment.

After a long, tense moment of silence, Dingo shook his head and let out a low whistle. "Jeez...If I had seen that in my sleep, I would never close

my eyes again.”

Saderia guiltily looked away. “I shouldn’t have told you. It was pretty creepy.”

“No, it’s okay.” Dash rested his tail comfortably on her shoulder and gave her a faint smile. “If I were you, I wouldn’t have wanted to keep something like that to myself.

“Dash is right.” Jeb paused, then shivered at the thought of her eerie Dream. “I’m with Dingo, though. If I had seen that, I would be too terrified to ever sleep again!”

Saderia managed a weak smile. “It’s not so bad now that I’m awake. Besides, I’ve seen plenty of scary things in real life, so it’s not that big a deal.”

Dingo nodded absently, then narrowed his eyes in thought. “I suppose you don’t know who all the figures were, right?”

Saderia let out a heavy sigh. “I wish I did, but no, I don’t.”

Dash frowned in bewilderment. “Do you have any idea what your Dream might mean?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes in thought. “Well...I think it’s obvious my Dream was using symbolism to try to tell me something. It’s not like there could actually be a giant pool of blood in real life. The only problem is that I don’t know what it’s meant to symbolize.”

Dingo’s eyes clouded with thought. “You said the dingoes were drowning in blood?” He paused and a shadow flitted across his face. “That kind of rings a bell.”

Saderia blinked and looked up at him in surprise. “It does?”

Dingo shrugged and nodded absently. “Yeah. Back when I lived in the pack, I sometimes thought to myself that with all the killing and violence going on in the desert, the pack would drown in all the blood they spilled. Obviously, I was exaggerating a little, but that’s what your Dream reminds me of. I don’t know if that’s significant or not.”

A frown spread across Saderia’s face and her eyes darkened with thought. “It might be. I don’t know how, but somehow it might be significant. Especially since I saw blood dripping from the fangs of one of the figures on the rock. The gore from his fangs was what filled the ocean with blood.”

Jeb shuddered fearfully. “Who was that figure that was going to kill you?”

A shiver of unease rustled Saderia’s fur. Narrowing her eyes, she shook her head in bewilderment. “I don’t know. But...” A shadow flitted across her face and her eyes darkened. “I have a feeling that it’s someone I know...someone I trust. When the figure sunk their claws into my paws, I felt...betrayed.” She paused, then frowned in confusion. “The figure never actually killed me, though. It never threw me into the blood.”

Dingo frowned. “Wouldn’t it have just done it after the Dream ended?”

“Dreams don’t work that way. Not necessarily,” Saderia murmured. “Dreams are supposed to show me what’s going to happen in the future. Every detail in a Dream matters. And the fact that the figure never actually killed me is an important detail.”

“Especially since you’re focusing on it so much,” Dash replied, raising an eyebrow. Catching the curious gazes of his friends, he shrugged. “I never even noticed that. But Saderia, who has special senses, did notice and it bothers her, so it’s obviously pretty significant and it must mean something. What, I don’t know, but *something*.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Dash is right. If that particular part stands out to me so much, it’s important. I don’t know why, though. If I felt betrayed by that figure, wouldn’t it be because I knew he was going to kill me?”

“Maybe you knew, but it never actually happened,” Dingo suggested, his face clouded with confusion as if he had no real concept of what he was saying. “Maybe you just...I don’t know...*thought* he would.”

Jeb frowned in bewilderment, his eyes clouded and dazed. “It’s a he?”

“It could be a she,” Saderia admitted with a shrug. “I just don’t know too many ‘she’s’ that would betray me. I mean, apart from Loki, Lisa, and Claw, who’s a ghost, most of my friends and acquaintances are guys.”

“Unless it’s someone you meet in the future,” Dash suggested.

Saderia nodded absently. “There’s that.”

“My head hurts,” Dingo muttered, rubbing his forehead gingerly with his paw.

Saderia shot him a sympathetic glance. “Sorry.”

Dingo heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes. "It's all right." The canine paused, then narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. "Hey, regardless of who that creepy figure guy is, why was his blood filling the bloody lake thing? What's that supposed to symbolize?"

A wave of fear and disquiet swept over Saderia, raising the fur on her back, even as confusion clouded her mind. Helplessly, she shook her head, unable to understand the Dream or her strange instinctual feelings. "I don't know. That part confuses me the most. I know it must symbolize something. Dingo, you said that one part of the Dream symbolized the dingoes drowning in their own bloodshed and that makes sense. The guy at the back of the rock who was dripping blood from his fangs must have been a dingo, one who was drowning the dingoes with the blood he shed. But the figure holding me down...he was bleeding himself, not dripping with the blood of others. That just doesn't make sense."

Dash frowned. "That is weird..." He paused, then narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Maybe...in order to understand what that symbolizes, you have to know who the figure was and why their blood—or whatever their blood symbolizes—means something."

"And I have absolutely no idea who it could be. All I know is that it might be someone I know and/or trust...or someone I *will* know or trust in the future." Saderia rolled her eyes and put a paw to her forehead. "This is hopeless."

Jeb's eyes widened in fear. "What do you think is going to happen then? What does the rest of the Dream mean?" Terror shone in his eyes. "Are we going to die?"

Saderia shook her head slowly, her eyes confused but sympathetic. "I don't think we're going to die, Jeb. Even if it seemed as if all hope was lost in the Dream, I only *had* that Dream so I could change the future and prevent everyone from dying. As long as I keep Dreaming and figuring things out, we should be okay." She gritted her teeth in a sudden flash of fury. "I just wish my Dreams weren't so ridiculously hard to understand!"

Dash rested his tail gently on her shoulder. "Let's try to figure out some of the other parts, parts we can actually understand."

"Yeah, like that other figure." Dingo narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, his gaze darkening. "You said there was someone behind the guy holding

you down, someone with blood dripping from their fangs who you assume is a dingo. I think it's Rock."

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise. "The new dingo Leader?"

Jeb blinked and frowned in bewilderment. "Huh? Why?"

Dingo coolly flicked his tail and gazed out at the desert. "It's simple. Rock is the Leader of the pack, the one commanding all the dingoes and causing them all to spill the blood that symbolically fills that pool of blood in Saderia's Dream. We know her Dream took place in the desert because of the sand, so the figure had to be a dingo for that reason and for others. The figure has to be Rock because his bloodshed and the bloodshed he commands the other dingoes to carry out would cause all the dingoes to drown in the blood they spilled, like in Saderia's Dream." He paused, then shrugged. "That's my theory, at least. What do you think, Saderia? Does that even remotely make sense?"

Saderia's eyes glimmered with surprise. "It does. I...I think you're right about that figure being Rock. He must be doing something to cause all that blood to be spilled. Something worse than normal," she added, seeing Dingo raise his eyebrows.

Dash frowned thoughtfully. "So that other figure, the one holding you down...he must have some connection to the new dingo Leader if he was on the platform with him."

"Yeah, I think he's right." Jeb narrowed his eyes, struggling to make sense of everything. "That Rock guy didn't attack the other guy on the rock or make him leave, so they must know each other somehow."

"You're right..." Saderia paused thoughtfully, then curled her lip. "Why would I feel betrayed by an acquaintance of Rock's, though? Why would I ever trust someone who knew Rock enough that I would feel betrayed by them later on?"

Dash frowned. "Maybe you somehow didn't know they were close to Rock."

"Maybe." Saderia shivered and shook her head hopelessly. "This whole thing gives me chills. Something's not right. Something's off. I just don't know what it is."

Dash winced and nodded darkly, a shadow flitting across his face. He paused, then looked up curiously. "What about the three figures that

were standing on the rock before the scene with the lake of blood? One of them must have been Rock.”

“The figure that let out a howl,” she murmured. “Yes, that had to be him.”

Jeb frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe one of the other figures was the guy who attacked you in the, uh, other scene.”

“Could be,” Saderia replied with a slight shrug.

Dingo narrowed his eyes in confusion. “Then who was the third guy?”

An image of the two figures huddled in the shadows of the pile of rocks at the back of the enormous stone platform flashed through Saderia’s mind, sending a nervous shiver down her spine. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “But I know that that huge stone formation must be a den. It must be Rock’s den.”

Dingo flicked his tail and shrugged. “That makes sense.”

“If you say so...” Jeb narrowed his eyes uncertainly and frowned. “What about the first part of your Dream? Do you think the voice that said ‘We cannot go on like this’ belonged to one of the guys you saw on the rock?”

Saderia’s eyes narrowed and her expression darkened. “It’s possible, but somehow I doubt it. I don’t even really know who said it—the voice wasn’t familiar—but whoever they are, they must have some sort of connection to Rock and whatever is going on in the pack. I just don’t know how the voice ties in with everything else.”

“Maybe Rock hurt the one the voice belonged to,” Dash suggested, narrowing his eyes in thought. “Maybe it was their blood on Rock’s fangs.”

Dingo snorted and rolled his eyes. “That wouldn’t surprise me.”

Saderia heaved a sigh. “Maybe you’re right, Dash. But we still don’t know for sure. I guess we’ll just have to see what happens in order for the Dream to make sense.”

Jeb shivered and looked away. “I hope we figure it out soon. I don’t want something like that to happen in real life!”

Saderia let out a soft breath and smiled. “Don’t worry, Jeb. I won’t let it happen.”

“You’ve made good progress, son.” Dastarius’s deep voice sounded from the shadows as the woodsy clearing took shape out of the darkness.

Blinking open his eyes, Dash gazed around at the clearing with wide amber eyes, watching as skeletal trees rose up from the darkness to form a canopy of dead branches overhead. The wintry grass took shape beneath him and an eerie light shimmered down into the clearing. A second later, his father crept out from a thick clump of undergrowth on the edge of the clearing, tossing his black mane back over his shoulders. To his relief, Dash didn’t once flinch at the sight of him. Already, he was getting better at convincing his father he wasn’t afraid of him. Or else he really had started to fear him less...

Dash narrowed his eyes accusingly. “You’ve been *watching* me?”

“Of course.” Dastarius flicked his tail carelessly as he sat back to face Dash, his expression as cool as ever. “I see you’ve already left the forest far behind.”

Unease glimmered in Dash’s eyes. “We have?”

“Yes.” Dastarius gazed absently around at the clearing. “I have to admit, that mutt friend of yours does come in handy.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in a glare. “He has a name, you know.”

“Right.” Dastarius apathetically flicked his tail. “All the same, he’s useful.”

Dash rolled his eyes. “Does this meeting have a point?”

“Of course it does.” A knowing glint lit up Dastarius’s amber eyes. “I can’t tell you more about the danger I warned you about, but I *can* help you prepare for it.”

Dash blinked in surprise, then raised an eyebrow. “Er...thanks, but I already know how to fight. And how would I fight with a ghost anyway?”

Dastarius chuckled softly. “I told you the dead couldn’t harm the living, not that the dead couldn’t fight with the living. I’m not talking about fighting anyway. In the days ahead, you may need to use your wit, your leadership skills, and your charisma—three areas you’re sorely lacking in.”

Dash flattened his ears in indignation. “Hey!”

“Take now for example.” Dastarius’s whiskers twitched in amusement. “I’m sure you could have come up with a much wittier comeback than that.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and glared daggers at him, but said nothing.

Dastarius sneered, then smoothly rose to his paws. Flicking his tail, he turned and started to pace back and forth across the frosty ground, his eyes glowing. "Until you're faced with the danger I warned you about, I'm going to prepare you for it in any way I can."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "So that I'll be able to save my life with sarcasm?"

A smirk twitched at the corners of his mouth. "Something like that. Wit is more than just smart remarks, son. To face the danger ahead, you will have to think quickly and critically since you might not have the Princess around to do it for you. Besides, mockery does have its uses. If you ever have to speak with your enemies, a nice, cutting remark will render them speechless. Kind of like how you fell silent just a moment ago."

Annoyance gleamed in Dash's eyes. "I don't think I like being used as an example." When Dastarius merely snickered, he rolled his eyes, then paused. A gleam of worry crept into his eyes when he thought about what his father had said. "Wait a minute...What do you mean I might not have Saderia around?" Alarm shone in his amber eyes. "You don't think she's going to get hurt, do you?"

"Not hurt, per se." Dastarius calmly flicked his tail and continued to pace the earth in front of Dash, keeping his emotionless gaze trained ahead. "You may have to do some things without her, though."

Dash narrowed his eyes. "Like what? I do everything with her. We're a team."

"Yes, but sometimes it is crucial to split up in order to make a plan work." Dastarius narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "How did Princess put it? *'That's why it's so great that there are so many of us to look after the forest. Think of it as royal business.'*"

Dash glared at him. "Stop quoting my life!"

An amused grin curled up the corners of his mouth. "I'm simply stating the facts."

Dash gave him a dry glare that was distinctly not amused. When Dastarius merely chuckled, he rolled his eyes and let out a reluctant sigh. "Sometimes the royal family does split up to do certain tasks. But Saderia and I *always* stick together and we *always* will."

"All right." Dastarius calmly held up a paw. "But just in case, humor me."

Dash heaved a weary sigh. “Fine. But I still don’t see how any of this is helping me find Karenisha and save her from getting killed.”

“It’ll all make sense soon,” Dastarius assured him, giving a light flick of his tail. “I can’t be sure of what will happen in the future since I don’t have Princess’s Power...but I do have an idea of what’s going to happen and what we’ll have to do to counter it and prevent you from being killed.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and studied him suspiciously. “Okay...I still don’t see how you can know what’s going to happen, though. I mean, Claw hasn’t figured out what’s going to happen—at least, I don’t think—and she sees the same things you do.”

“Claw is looking at it a different way.” Dastarius paced across the grass and gazed thoughtfully at the shadowed woods. “She must know what the Queen’s captors are planning, as I do, but she’s probably trying to figure out a way to get around it, rather than a way to make it work to our advantage. Claw’s heart may be in the right place, but she doesn’t know much about making plans.”

Dash frowned in confusion. “You sound like you know her.”

Dastarius shrugged. “We’ve met once or twice. It’s not important right now.”

Indignation and suspicion clouded Dash’s eyes. Part of him wanted to protest that yes, it *was* kind of important that his dead father had met and spoken to Saderia’s spirit guide, but he doubted he would get anywhere if he tried. Rolling his eyes, he glanced bitterly down at his paws. “I suppose you would know something about making plans.”

“Yes.” A shadow flitted across Dastarius’s face and he cast a sideways glance at Dash. “And though I didn’t put that knowledge to good use in the past, at least now I can help you by using my understanding of the criminal mind.”

He had a point. Maybe not a great point, but a point nonetheless. Dash frowned and studied his father curiously. “So you know exactly what Karenisha’s captors are going to do and what we should do about it?”

Dastarius coolly flicked his tail. “I don’t know exactly what they’re thinking, but I have a vague idea. That’s all I need to make a plan.”

“Yeah...” Dash looked away uncomfortably, trying to find the right way to phrase what he wanted to say. “Uh, I know you’re good at making

‘plans,’ but they usually don’t, er, benefit the community...”

“I’ve turned over a new leaf,” Dastarius promised, a solemn gleam in his eyes. “This plan will keep you safe, and although I didn’t design it to benefit ‘the community’—which I assume means Princess and her followers—it will in the long run.”

Dash hesitated uncertainly. “I still don’t know...”

“Give it a few days,” Dastarius urged, sitting back to meet his gaze with calm, cool amber eyes. “Wait a while and see what happens. When you figure a few things out, see whose plan will help more: mine or the Princess’s...when she comes up with one.”

“Which she *will*,” Dash growled, flattening his ears defensively.

Dastarius chuckled softly. “Oh, I don’t doubt that. She’s quite the plotter herself. All the same, once she has her plan, you’ll simply have to decide which of ours is better.”

Dash narrowed his eyes nervously. “I don’t think I like where this is going...”

Dastarius shrugged. “Then get out while you can. I never forced you to meet with me.”

Dash blinked in surprise and hesitated. It had never occurred to him before that he actually had a choice in coming to these meetings. The thought of just ‘walking out’ danced in the back of his mind and he glanced wonderingly at the shadowy woods surrounding the clearing. Part of him wanted to just get up and leave right then and there, but he knew if he did, curiosity would eat at him forever. If he didn’t stick around, he would never find out what the danger was and what Dastarius could do about it. What if something bad happened because he left before he could find out what the danger was?

His mind whirled with indecision and uncertainty. It never hurt to have two plans to choose from, two options to combat whatever danger he might have to face. Maybe he could even pick a few things from both Dastarius’s and Saderia’s plans to make an even better plan. If he kept going to these meetings, it would only be because he wanted to see if there was anything Dastarius could tell him that Saderia, her Dreams, or Claw couldn’t. It wasn’t as if he was picking Dastarius over Saderia. That was stupid. All he was doing was trying to see all the options he had to keep his friends safe.

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. “Do you want to leave?”

Dash flattened his ears and glanced at his paws in embarrassment. “No, I’ll...I’ll stay.” He shuffled his paws awkwardly. “Go back to what you were saying.”

Dastarius sneered and rose to continue pacing the clearing, his eyes cool and calm like a teacher about to give a lecture. “Wit, leadership, and charisma go hand in hand. And if all goes according to plan, those skills are going to save you and your friends. But you’ve got to be convincing.” The dark lion paused and looked back to meet Dash’s gaze with thoughtful, calculating eyes. “We’ll work on your charisma first because in the days to come, you might have to put on quite an act.”

Dash opened his mouth to ask what he meant by that, then closed it again, realizing he wouldn’t get any more answers out of Dastarius than he had the last time.

An approving sneer curled up the corners of Dastarius’s mouth as he paced. “Good. You’re learning. The first rule of speaking is knowing what not to say.”

“Claw!” Saderia’s tail curled up in delight as the darkness around her faded away to reveal the sleepy spirit world. Rolling sand dunes tinged blue by an ethereal glow spread out before her and a wispy, light brown spirit appeared in front of her. A grin spread across Saderia’s face. “I didn’t think I would see you again for a while.”

A smile spread across Claw’s light brown face. “I thought I would come see how things were going. Not that I really need to. I’ve been watching you since you left.”

Saderia smiled weakly. “I figured that.” Sitting back on the sandy ground, she gave her spirit guide a curious gaze. “So what do you think? Are we on the right track?”

Claw bit her lip and glanced uncertainly down at her paws. “It’s... hard to say.”

Saderia frowned in confusion. “What do you mean?”

The light spirit let out a soft sigh and weakly looked up to meet Saderia’s eyes, her light brown irises dark with regret. “I guess I should be honest with you. I don’t want to send you straight to your mother, Saderia. It’s too dangerous to try to save her right now. She’s too heavily guarded. If

you tried to go get her now, all of you would end up being killed. You, her, and your friends.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in horror and her heart skipped a beat. “So there’s no hope at all? This journey was just a waste of time?” Shock flashed in her eyes and she frantically shook her head. “No, there’s got to be a way to save her! There has to be!”

“Calm down, Saderia.” Claw narrowed her eyes in concern and flicked her tail to signal for her to relax. “Yes, there might be a way to save her, but I have no way of knowing if it will work or not. Still...” Her voice trailed off and her light brown eyes clouded with thought. “It’s the only thing that might save you and your mother...”

Saderia narrowed her eyes uncertainly. “What is it?”

Claw hesitated, then took a deep breath and glanced darkly down at her paws, her gaze troubled. “There’s someone I want you to meet on this journey... If you continue in the direction you’ve been going, eventually you should meet up with a group of dingoes. I don’t think they’ll hurt you. Or if they do, you’ll be able to fight them off easily.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Dingoes? Fight off *dingoes*... easily?”

A wry smile tugged at the corners of Claw’s mouth. “Weird, huh? But it’s true. They’re not a threat to you, not in their current state. You’ll meet up with them eventually, which is what I’ve been hoping for. Once you meet them, you should just follow your instincts. I already know what your intuition is going to tell you.”

Saderia blinked in bewilderment. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I know you.” Claw’s light brown eyes twinkled knowingly in the hazy light of the spirit realm. “Your instincts are tied to your morals, the way you think, your compassion, your fierceness, your determination. Knowing you, I can tell what you’ll want to do when you find these dingoes. It will be the same thing I would want to do.” The light spirit paused, then heaved a weary sigh and looked away. “Enough about that, though. You don’t need me to explain how your own Dream sense works.” She looked up and met Saderia’s gaze with burning light brown eyes. “Once you meet up with these dingoes, I’m hoping that everything will work out

and that you'll be able to help more than one animal. But...there are a lot of things that could go wrong. Horribly wrong."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then narrowed her eyes and met the spirit's gaze with determined amber irises. "I understand you can't tell me everything, Claw, but could you please tell me what you're hinting at? What's the one thing that will save my mother?"

Claw closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let it out in a slow, shaky sigh. Silence fell over them and when she opened her eyes again, their light brown depths were clouded and shadowed with pain. "A war," she murmured. "A huge, bloody war."

Chapter Twelve

Conditioning

“*What?*” Saderia gaped at Claw in disbelief, the fur on her back starting to bristle in alarm. “Are you serious?”

Claw heaved a sigh and guiltily looked away. “Normally, I would never suggest such a thing—any other time, I would want to do everything to prevent a battle. All fighting does is cause pain, suffering, and death. But in this situation, I can’t think of any other way for you to get your mother back without losing your life and everything you hold dear. I have a bad feeling about what your mother’s captors are planning. And from what I can see, the only other way you could ever get your mother back would be by giving up something that you would be devastated to lose. Your mother’s life is hardly the only thing at stake. Unless you do something, the forest will become nothing more than a horrible, blood-driven land.” Her eyes darkened with pain. “It’s bad enough the desert is nothing but a cesspool of violence. I don’t want the same thing to happen to your forest. And right now, the only way I can see you preventing that is by fighting back.”

Saderia stared at her in incredulity. “So the only way to keep my friends and my kingdom safe from violence is with more violence?”

“I’m aware of the hypocrisy.” Claw’s eyes flashed and her expression hardened. “I don’t like it any more than you do. But I don’t think we have a choice.”

Saderia glanced anxiously at her paws, her eyes shadowed with unease. “I don’t know about this...I don’t even know who I would be fighting or how it would save my mother.”

“I know.” Claw let out a soft breath, her expression sympathetic. “You don’t have to go to war right away, Saderia. If you did, you would die within seconds. That much is obvious.” Seeing Saderia’s fur bristle in terror, Claw patiently held up a paw. “*However*, if you continue your journey, you will hopefully learn some things that will turn the battle in your favor. On your journey, you might meet someone who can help

you..." She let out a weary sigh. "I don't know, Saderia. I don't know how it's all going to work out. All I can do is tell you what I think *could* happen. The best advice I can give you now is just to continue your journey and keep your eyes open for anything that might help you."

Unease crept over Saderia. "But you can't guarantee that I *will* find help?"

Claw looked away, a guilty expression on her face. "I'm afraid not. I can't predict what everyone is going to do. I can't promise you that the animals I want you to meet won't turn on you. I can't promise that Karenisha's captors won't change their minds and come up with a different plan entirely. I can't even promise that this journey will help."

"But it *might*?" Desperation shone in her eyes. "There's a chance it *might* help?"

Claw nodded firmly. "There's definitely a chance. But that chance is very unstable and extremely unpredictable."

Saderia sighed and gazed wearily at her paws. "At least there's a tiny chance..."

Claw bit her lip and looked away. "I'm sorry. I know I'm not being very helpful. I just don't know what to tell you."

"It's okay." Saderia took a deep breath and faced Claw with a weak, reassuring smile. "Don't feel bad, Claw. I know you're only trying to help."

Claw heaved a sigh and closed her eyes. "Yeah...I guess."

Saderia frowned and studied her closely, a worried gleam in her amber eyes. Seeing Claw's miserable expression, she longed to find some way to cheer her up, but she didn't know what to say. Struggling to find something to lift her spirits or at least assuage her worry, she thought back to everything that had happened. Her thoughts lingered on one thing and she met Claw's gaze with narrowed, thoughtful eyes. "Hey, I had a Dream last night."

Claw blinked and looked up briskly. "Oh, yeah. I heard you say something to your friends about it this morning, but I only caught the end of it."

Saderia smiled faintly. "That's okay. I would be happy to tell you about it."

A faint smile crossed Claw's face and her eyes lit up with curiosity. "Okay, go ahead."

Saderia hesitated, then took a deep breath and started to describe the Dream as calmly as possible. A dark shiver of dread and unease shuddered down her spine as she described the strange rock formation, the eerie pool of blood, the creepy figures, and the unnerving voice at the end of her Dream.

When she finished her eerie tale, Claw's eyes glowed with excitement despite the shiver that passed through her. "I think your chance has just been upped," she murmured. "Your Dream sense seems to think you're headed in the right direction."

How Claw managed to get *anything* positive out of the creepy Dream, Saderia would never understand. Shaking off her doubts, she managed a weak smile. "If you say so." She paused, then narrowed her eyes uneasily. "But what about all the blood?"

A nervous frown spread across Claw's face and a shiver raced down her spine. "I don't know. The symbolism in your Dream confuses me just as much as it does you."

"Hmm..." A shadow flitted across Saderia's face and a dark sense of dread swept over her. "Do you think the blood has anything to do with the war you suggested?"

A shadow darkened her face. "The thought crossed my mind." Claw paused, her eyes dark with dread. Biting her lip, she glanced anxiously at the dull dunes, then turned to meet Saderia's gaze with grave brown eyes. "It's almost morning, so you need to wake up soon. Just remember to follow your instincts. If it comes to war, it will be awful. Unthinkable. Hard to survive. Before you go charging into it, make sure you know what you're doing. And make sure there are no other options first." The spirit heaved a sigh and looked her dead in the eye. "Above all else, be careful and take care of those you hold dear."

"Hey! Wake up!" A sharp jab in the side made Dash's eyes fly open in alarm. Letting out a gasp of surprise, he staggered frantically to his paws, his heart skipping a beat. Wildly, he whipped around to stare out at the hazy, sunlit sand dunes around him, then froze when his gaze landed on Dingo's smug, smirking face. Relief washed over him, but a playful growl rumbled in his throat. "What was that?" he demanded, lashing his tail. "Revenge?"

“You know it.” Dingo sneered and chuckled under his breath at his angry expression.

Dash rolled his eyes and turned away, ignoring his mocking laughter. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, he gazed around their makeshift camp and smiled when he saw Saderia and Jeb sitting a few feet away from him, watching him with eyes glimmering with amusement. At least Dingo had had a reason for being a jerk and waking him up...

He blinked in surprise and frowned. “How long was I asleep?”

“Not *that* long,” Saderia replied, trying to stifle a laugh. “Dingo, Jeb, and I woke up a little while ago. I told them to let you sleep in a little longer, but then Dingo...” Her eyes flicked to the sneering canine and she broke off in a giggle. “Sorry.”

Dash rolled his eyes, but an amused smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Oh well. I’m awake now. I suppose we should get going.”

“You’re right.” Saderia smiled and flicked her tail warmly. “Come on, guys. Let’s get moving. I have a feeling we’re on the right track.”

Dingo pricked his ears curiously. “Why? Did you have a Dream last night?”

Saderia hesitated and nervously flicked her tail. “Actually, I talked to Claw...”

Dingo blinked in surprise, then managed a weak smile and nodded. “Okay. You’re right then. We must be on the right track if she thinks so.”

Saderia glanced at him in surprise, then smiled and nodded. Flicking her tail, she padded across the sand with Dingo falling into step beside her, leading the way through the desert. Dash and Jeb followed close behind. Dash’s eyes flicked toward Dingo as he walked and his eyes lit up with surprise. Instead of the shadowed expression he usually wore, Dingo’s face glowed with a faint smile. His shining eyes darted back and forth, as if savoring the sight of his old home. Dash just smiled. It might be bizarre for Dingo to miss such a savage place, but Dash was glad he felt at home. Heaving a sigh, he gazed out at the desert and felt the smile slip off his face when his thoughts turned to darker matters.

One question burned in his mind more strongly than all the rest. Should he trust Dastarius? Should he really listen to him and keep pretending to go along with his plan in the hopes that it would have some benefit in the future? What if by going along with Dastarius’s plan, he

ended up getting hurt instead of helped? That option seemed way too likely. He still wasn't sure he bought Dastarius's new persona of doting, concerned father.

Come to think of it, he wasn't sure what to think of *anything* that had happened. From their last meeting, it was clear Dastarius was preparing him for *something*...but what? The last part of his meeting with Dastarius had been spent being 'trained.' His father had urged him not to show any fear—or any emotion—for the coming tasks. After teaching him how to mask his feelings, the dark lion had vanished, telling Dash to practice what he had learned in real life. According to Dastarius, if everything went according to his mysterious plan, Dash would need to use those skills soon.

The thought of merging reality with his strange Dream encounters with his father didn't sound too appealing, though. The distinction between the real world and the supernatural was blurry enough as it was. Besides, he didn't like the idea of using his friends as guinea pigs to practice Dastarius's new 'skills' on. At the same time, he was uncomfortably aware of the fact that his father could watch him any time he pleased to see if Dash was doing what he had asked him to. Was he watching him now? Dash's fur prickled at the thought and he shivered in unease. He hated being watched...

Shaking the thoughts away, he gazed absently around at his surroundings. His eyes focused on Saderia and curiosity burned in his mind. What exactly did Claw tell her in their meetings? Was it similar to what Dastarius told him? Part of him longed to ask Saderia what her spirit guide had told her, but Saderia rarely elaborated on her ghostly meetings. Usually, the only thing she told them was that Claw had told her to go there or do that or something of that nature. If he asked her about it, she would probably tell him...but she might wonder why he was asking. Considering he had never shown any interest before, it might make him look suspicious...Not that he was doing anything bad!

Heaving a weary sigh, Dash forced away his chaotic thoughts. The heat radiating from the boiling sun left him with too little energy to waste thinking difficult thoughts.

Ahead of him, Dingo gazed around with gleaming light brown eyes. "I have to say, I'm impressed," he called, making everyone look up. "This

is the fastest time we've made so far. Never before have we gone so far in only three days."

Saderia's dull eyes lit up with hope and excitement. "That's great, Dingo!"

"I guess we're just getting used to the desert." Dash paused to swipe a strip of his sweaty brown mane off his face, then shrugged sheepishly. "Well, kind of."

Dingo grinned, then gazed dreamily out at the vast desert, his eyes softening and a weak sigh escaping his throat. "Call me crazy, but I'm glad to be back."

"Okay, Crazy," Dash quipped, giving him a playful grin that Dingo returned.

Jeb glanced shyly at his paws. "I'm actually kind of glad to be out here, too."

Saderia pricked her ears and glanced back in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah." A weak smile crossed Jeb's face. "I just...I used to be so scared of everything, but now I'm actually out in the Land Beyond the Forest with you guys, facing danger and everything else...I actually feel like I'm good for something now."

Dingo grinned and flicked him with his tail. "That's always a good feeling."

Saderia smiled proudly. "That's great, Jeb. I'm glad you like it out here."

Jeb shrugged sheepishly and smiled. "I thought I would never be like you guys. I never thought I would go out on adventures with you guys, but...here I am!"

A warm, joyful expression spread across Saderia's face. "I'm glad." Hope and excitement glowed in her chest as she spoke, bringing a brilliant smile to her face. Her eyes flicked around to each of her friends and her face lit up with happiness. All of them were finally together. At last, all the members of the prophecy had been assembled.

Three days had passed by like three years. Still, it wasn't enough...

Makero stood rigidly in front of the cracked living room window, his green irises dull and shadowed. His eyes focused intently on the wild, overgrown clearing and woods just beyond his home, but he didn't seem to

see either of the leafy green worlds. His thoughts were in a different place. Unconsciously, his tail twitched across the dirty floor. Never once did he tear his eyes off the window. Just a few minutes ago, Cia and Jash had asked him *why* he had been staring out the window for hours. All he had said was that he didn't know. The two of them had simply nodded and backed away.

They thought he was crazy. That much was clear. At that point, Makero didn't really care. What he cared about was the fact that they seemed to think Saderia wouldn't be coming back. Clearly, that wasn't true. Saderia and her friends had each other. They would take care of each other. Help each other. Fight for each other. Die for each other.

Pain flashed in the King's eyes and he let out a heavy sigh. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted bright blue eyes peeking out from the shadows of the dimly lit left hallway. Apparently, Cia and Jash were still spying on him, waiting for him to snap and lose his mind. The King rolled his eyes and looked away with an annoyed flick of his tail. The two of them should have more faith in him. He was hardly about to snap. In the three days that had passed since Saderia left, he had kept himself busy. Every day, he traveled to a new neighborhood to oversee repairs. Each time he traveled to a new part of the forest, the woodsy land looked better and better. It wouldn't be long until the forest was back to its former glory. Hopefully, by then, Saderia would be able to return to see it.

More than anyone else, Makero had kept busy, working long into the night to encourage the forest's rejuvenation. Was it too much to ask for a break? Even if he only spent his off-time staring out the window, who cared? It was his break and he had the right to spend it however he wanted. Ignoring the concerned eyes burning into his back, he studied the outside world closely, never looking away. Any minute, he hoped to see Saderia burst out from the woods and race across the lush green grass to the front door. Except it had only been three days—way too early to expect them to return home.

A heavy sigh escaped Makero's throat. Maybe he was starting to lose it. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes, then slowly opened them again. A flash of movement in the dense brush lining the edge of the clearing caught his eye, making his heart skip with hope. Had Saderia decided to come home early? A second later, two figures darted out of the

bushes and raced into the clearing, making Makero's hopes crash. It wasn't Saderia and her friends, home early from their journey. It was Jeb's parents, Telku and Jati.

Dread rose in Makero's chest. He had a bad idea of where this was going. Seconds later, the two kraguers skidded to a halt in front of his front door. Wild, frantic knocking filled the air the instant they stopped, making Makero's heart sink. Behind him, Cia and Jash stumbled clumsily out of their hiding place, but he cut them off before they could reach the door. Tearing his eyes off the window, he stepped up to the door and opened it with a sigh. In front of him stood the kraguers, their faces twisted with fear and worry.

The second he opened the door, Telku and Jati jumped back with a cry of alarm. Shrinking back with bristling fur, the kraguers eyed him warily, their expressions uneasy.

"K-King Makero, right?" Telku nervously stepped closer to him, his eyes wary.

"Right." Makero studied their worried, desperate faces for a long moment and faked a weak expression of calm to hide his dread. "Is there something you need?"

Jati gaped at him in disbelief. "We need our kid back!"

"Jati," Telku hissed, shooting her a warning glare. When she narrowed her eyes, he sighed and glanced at Makero. "We were just, uh, wondering if you had seen Jeb?"

Makero heaved a sigh. "I'm sorry, but I haven't seen Saderia, Dash, Dingo, or Jeb for three days. I'm sure when Jeb comes home, though, you'll be the first to know."

Jati lashed her tail furiously. "Well, when do you think that's going to be? It's already been three days! How long do you think they're going to be gone?"

Telku shot her a harsh, stern glare. "Jati!"

"Shut up, Telku!" Jati's fur bristled and her blue/gray eyes blazed with fury. "All Jeb left us was a *note* telling us he was leaving with his friends! We don't know where he is, what he's doing, if he's *alive*, or what's going on!" Gritting her teeth, she glared bitterly down at her paws. "I'm worried about him. And about that Dingo creature, too. He was sweet. He helped us out all the time. He always got us food and led us into town." Her

eyes flashed with pain and she lashed her tail. "I just need to know they're okay!"

Makero took a deep breath and let it out slowly, forcing himself to seem calm. "Saderia left me a note, too. Before she left with her friends, she wrote me a letter that explained everything. They're all together and they'll look out for each other. You don't have to worry too much." He paused, then gazed dreamily out at the woods. "I suspect they're somewhere in the desert. I wouldn't advise going after them because the desert is extremely vast and incredibly easy to get lost in. *Unless* you have someone with you who can guide you," he added firmly, seeing their terrified faces. "Dingo knows the desert like he knows his own name. He'll guide them and make sure they make it through alive."

Telku let out a shaky sigh. "I suppose that makes me feel a bit better. I guess Jeb did go through the desert with his friends before. He returned just fine the last time. So they'll probably be fine this time, too, right?"

Makero nodded absently. "Most likely."

Jati let out a snarl. "I want a definite answer!"

"I'm sorry." Makero glanced guiltily down at his paws. "I want one, too, but I'm afraid we can't have a definite answer. I can tell you that Saderia, Dash, and Dingo are strong and competent and that they'll look after Jeb, but that's it."

Jati gritted her teeth. "*When* will they come home?"

Telku flicked her sharply with his tail and cast her a warning glance. "What she means is...do you have any idea of when they'll return? A day? A week?"

Makero shrugged absently. "The journey across the desert to your forest normally takes about a week. And a return trip is another week. So at the bare minimum, they'll be gone for two weeks. But they're not just making two trips across the desert. They're searching for someone, and trying to find someone in the desert might take some time."

Jati gaped at him in disbelief. "Jeb's going to be in that place for over two weeks?"

Makero let out a soft sigh. "I understand your concern. My own children were once gone for over a month. I had even begun to think I had lost them. But somehow they managed to survive for a *month*. To them, two

weeks or more won't really be a problem. You just have to have faith in them. They'll come home as soon as they can."

Jati gave him a mutinous glare, then just sighed. "Fine. I hope you're right."

"Me too," Makero murmured, glancing wearily down at his paws.

Telku dipped his head courteously to the King. "Thank you for your time." Giving Makero one last, lingering glance, he turned and slowly started to pad back toward the woods, brushing up against Jati to guide her back home.

Makero let out a sigh, then slowly stepped back into the house, closing the door silently behind him. Listlessly, he padded back toward the cracked window and gazed absently out at the green forest. A heavy sigh escaped his throat. Two weeks or more...Would those weeks pass by quickly or slowly? How long would it be before he saw his children burst out of the woods and run home? Hopefully, it would be soon...

"I'm sorry I'm late, son." Dastarius crept out from behind a shadowed clump of undergrowth on the edge of the dream clearing, his black-tipped tail flicking excitedly back and forth. An eerie light glowed in his eyes as he sat down on the brittle grass in front of his son.

Dash eyed him warily. "That's okay." He paused, then frowned curiously. "You seem excited about something."

A sneer flickered across Dastarius's face. "I just know you're on the right track. Enough about that, though. Right now, we have to focus on preparing you."

Dash heaved a sigh. Part of him wanted to ask 'For what?' Normally, he would, but instead, he just took a deep breath and nodded. "All right. How should I prepare?"

Dastarius lightly flicked his tail. "Well, for starters, you really should practice these things in real life with your friends."

Dash wrinkled his nose. "I just don't feel right doing it. It's like I'm using them."

Dastarius's eyes widened in surprise. "You're not using them." His gaze softened. "You're benefiting from them. Friends are supposed to help each other grow."

“Maybe...” Dash flattened his ears and uneasily shuffled his paws. “I still don’t think I want to, er, grow by practicing these ‘skills’ on them.”

“Why?” Dastarius calmly flicked his tail and eyed him knowingly. “Because you think they’re bad? Dash, they’re simple leadership skills. The King and Queen know these things. So does Princess. Why is it such a crime for you to know them, too?”

Dash’s eyes flashed mutinously. “Well, considering who the teacher is...”

Dastarius merely chuckled. “Ah, so we’re back to this, are we?” The dark lion placed a ghostly paw under Dash’s chin and forced him to look up and meet his gaze. His eyes shone fervently in the dim light. “I’m going to teach you a very simple concept, Dash. Skills themselves aren’t evil. The animal who has them *decides* to use them for evil. And no one can *make* that animal choose that option.”

Dash skeptically narrowed his eyes. “So let’s say lying is a skill. You’re saying lying isn’t bad?”

“Yes.” Dastarius calmly flicked his tail. “If you can lie well but don’t *choose* to lie—or at least choose not to lie for your own personal gain—then it’s not a bad skill.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise. What he said actually made sense. Still, he couldn’t believe he was getting moral advice from Dastarius...

“It’s like fighting.” Dastarius tapped him with his wispy tail and gave him a knowing look. “You know how to fight. I’ve seen you. But you don’t go around killing or using brutality to get what you want. You use your skill to save your friends.”

Dash blinked several times in amazement. “I guess...you’re right.”

A sneer twitched at the corners of Dastarius’s mouth. “You sound surprised.” When Dash shuffled his paws uncomfortably, his father simply flicked his tail. “Anyway, are you ready to begin or are there any other objections you’d like to get off your chest?”

Dash looked down in embarrassment. “No, I’m...I’m good.”

“Good.” Dastarius rose smoothly to his paws and started to pace, never taking his cool eyes off Dash. “Put your head up,” he snapped. “You have to have confidence.”

Dash’s face burned with humiliation and he quickly lifted his head. “Sorry.”

Dastarius growled. "Don't apologize. Leaders don't apologize for trivial things."

Dash blinked in surprise and opened his mouth to say something, then quickly clamped it shut. It took all his willpower to stop himself from looking away from his father's fiery gaze. This was harder than it looked...

Dastarius started to circle him, his tail twitching coolly back and forth. "In your group of friends, you're the shy one. That's something you'll have to get over. Leaders must be strong, not afraid to speak their mind. And they shouldn't have to apologize or answer to anyone. Leaders must command respect." He narrowed his eyes and studied Dash closely. "There are a few things you need to remember to be a better leader: keep your head up, stand up straight, and look others in the eye when you speak. Say what you must say in a strong voice. Don't yell, but be firm and speak with certainty. When someone asks you a question, say yes or no, not 'I guess.' When giving orders, be clear about them and don't doubt your decisions."

Dash flattened his ears uncomfortably. "Okay..."

"Speak louder and with more conviction," Dastarius growled.

Dash averted his eyes and took a deep breath, trying not to look down. "Okay," he muttered in a voice slightly louder than before.

"Better." Dastarius's eyes flashed and a faint, appeased sneer crossed his face. "It's not as good as it could be, but you'll get there."

Dash let out an inaudible sigh and flattened his ears anxiously. His body burned with discomfort and he longed to relax, but he forced himself to remain in the same rigid, upright position Dastarius had wanted. Afraid of making a mistake and getting snapped at, he sat stiffly in the center of the clearing, trying not to breathe.

Silently, Dastarius circled him, his ghostly paws silent on the frosty grass. His eyes bored into Dash's fur, emotionless and unreadable. Slowly, he made three circles around Dash, his tail flicking lightly back and forth and his eyes studying him intently. After a long moment of silence, Dastarius paused beside him and studied him soundlessly, then without warning, he gave him a sharp, sudden jab in the side.

A yelp of surprise escaped Dash's throat and he jumped in alarm at the sudden cold, eerie touch. Frantically, he whipped around and gaped at his father in disbelief. "What was that for?"

“You’re doing it wrong.” Dastarius sat back in front of him and calmly flicked his tail. “The point of sitting up straight is not to make you feel tense and uncomfortable. Quite the opposite, it’s to show others that you’re confident and capable. You’ll never project that image the way you’re doing it. Others will easily sense your discomfort. Especially someone like Princess, who’s a master at it. You have to trust yourself and believe yourself to be confident in order for others to believe it, as well.”

Dash’s ears flattened in annoyance. “I’m working on it, okay?”

Dastarius’s whiskers twitched in amusement. “Don’t end sentences with questions.”

Dash glared at him and lashed his tail. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

A sneer crept across Dastarius’s face. “You’ll never know.”

Annoyance glowed in Dash’s eyes and he lashed his tail in frustration. “You know, I don’t have to take this from a dead guy! I can just walk out of here!”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow, then simply held up his tail and pointed to the shadowed woods, indicating which way to leave. When Dash just hissed and glanced bitterly at his paws, Dastarius chuckled and dropped his tail. With a knowing look, he crept closer to Dash, coolly meeting his annoyed gaze. “If you don’t want me to criticize you, prove that you can do better. Show me that I have no reason to criticize you. Prove that you can take whatever critique someone might have. That you’re better than them.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in annoyance. “How exactly am I supposed to do that?”

“You’ll have to figure that out yourself,” Dastarius replied, his voice calm and smooth. “Leaders don’t rely on someone else to tell them what to do.”

Dash flattened his ears. “You’re not making this easy.”

A sardonic sneer crossed Dastarius’s face. “Well, I *am* preparing you for reality.”

Dash just sighed and rolled his eyes.

His father frowned. “I don’t see why it’s so difficult. After all, in your little circle of friends, you’re the most important one. You’re the one they would be lost without.”

Dash raised an eyebrow. "Yeah right. I think you're confusing me with Saderia."

"*That's* your problem." Without warning, Dastarius pointed his tail at him and gave him a stern, knowing glare. "You're living in the Princess's shadow."

"I am not!" Dash lashed his tail, then paused and narrowed his eyes. "And even if I was, so what? Saderia *is* the leader. She's the one who guides us and helps us the most, and *she's* the one we would be lost without. She holds us together."

Dastarius nonchalantly flicked his tail. "Not necessarily."

"Oh?" Dash narrowed his eyes in a challenge. "How so?"

Dastarius shrugged calmly. "I won't deny that Princess is a leader, and a decent one at that. But she hasn't done as much as you. She may be the leader of your group of friends, but you're the one who does the work, work you don't get recognized for. Your friends would be lost without you. After all, without you, Princess's orders wouldn't be carried out."

Dash bristled angrily. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you're Princess's slave." Dastarius's amber eyes flashed and he coldly narrowed his eyes, then paused and shrugged lightly. "But that can be fixed."

Dash glared at him. "I'm not Saderia's slave! I'm her friend!" A low growl rumbled in his throat and he flattened his ears. "Besides, Saderia does plenty of work, too. She does more than me. Since you've been *watching* me, you should know that."

His father raised an eyebrow. "I have been watching you. Do you know what I saw? I saw you work hard just to help Princess get by. I saw you acting calm and brave. I saw you doing everything you could to support her. And I saw you calmly sit back as all the glory for your hard work was whisked away. At the same time, I watched as Princess was revered for doing things just as good as the things you've been doing all along." He heaved a weary sigh. "Dash, your modesty is a virtue, but it's extremely inconvenient."

Dash blinked in surprise and frowned. "I don't think all of that is really true..."

Dastarius coolly flicked his tail. "That's because you don't want to think it's true. You want to keep believing that no one is as good as your

Princess leader. If you stop believing that, then you—just like all her other little ‘friends’—feel lost.”

Dash let out a cold, angry hiss. “You’re making her out to be some kind of dictator and she’s not!”

“All right.” Dastarius coolly held up a paw and gave him a mild glance. “I’m not trying to make her out to be a bad animal. I’m just saying she’s not as great as she’s made out to be and that you’re just as important as she is.”

Dash just sighed and rolled his eyes. After all, it wasn’t as if it was shocking to hear Dastarius talking bad about Saderia. “Never mind,” he muttered. “Can we just move on? I still say Saderia’s the best leader there is, but we’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

Dastarius shrugged. “Fair enough. But in case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you of all the important things you’ve done.” He held up a claw. “One, you rescued her from my dungeon. Without you, I assure you she wouldn’t be here right now.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and a low growl rumbled in his throat. “I wouldn’t have thought you would want to remind me of that time.”

Dastarius apathetically flicked his tail. “It’s not as if I can deny it.” Without missing a beat, he held up another claw. “Two, you saved her from my slightly insane ex-wife. Again, without you, she wouldn’t have survived.”

Dash raised an eyebrow. “*Slightly?*”

A grin twitched at the corners of his mouth. “Now, now, let’s not talk bad about your mother.”

Dash’s whiskers twitched in amusement and he tried to hide a grin even as a jolt of shock shot through him. Talking about Lolista felt strange. Hearing Dastarius say anything about her felt weird, considering her name had been all but banned from the household when Dastarius had been alive...A sense of discomfort rose in his chest, but he pushed it away and turned back to his father.

Dastarius’s expression faded back into seriousness and he calmly met Dash’s gaze. “Third, you tried to give her a reality check when she wanted to go looking for the hunters. Later, when the Princess ended up trapped under a tree by the same humans she was looking for, you refused to leave her, which was probably a dumb thing to do, but admirable all the

same. When you were in the desert, you fought the dingoes and did your best to keep her safe. And lastly, you kept her sane when she was living in that strange forest. You did her job for her. You looked after the forest while she recovered. You did everything you could to get her back on her feet. For crying out loud, son, you almost died for her.” His eyes narrowed when Dash uncomfortably looked away and a low growl rumbled in his throat. “Look me in the eye.”

Wincing, Dash forced himself to look up and meet his gaze. His father stared back at him unflinchingly, his eyes knowing. “You’ve got a lot to be proud of, son. Show it.”

Dash blinked in surprise and stared at him in shock for a long, tense moment. After a long pause, he managed a weak smile and sat up a little straighter. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me now.” Dastarius rose to his paws and started to pace, his eyes flashing in the dim light. “We’ve still got a lot to cover. The main thing you need to work on is looking others in the eye when you speak. It’s more important than you think.”

Dash nodded firmly and tried to speak in a more confident tone. “All right.” A glimmer of hope shone in his amber eyes. Maybe these ‘lessons’ weren’t as bad as he thought. The only thing his father seemed to be teaching him were a few simple tricks, not bad things. Maybe these ‘lessons’ would actually help him someday. After all, Dastarius had told him he was on the right track. Maybe continuing to come to these nighttime meetings had been a good idea, after all. But was that the only reason he had returned?

With a jolt of surprise, he realized...he was actually enjoying spending time with his father. Dastarius actually *was* a lot different. In the past, the only thing he had done was yell at Dash or try to force him to change his mild ways with violence. Now he was simply trying to help him...and not *forcing* him to do anything. That one simple change was enormous. The thought that Dastarius had changed even one bit seemed shocking, but...not entirely unbelievable. Behind his new persona, there was still a shred of the old, stern Dastarius, the one Dash remembered. It wasn’t as if his entire personality had changed...just shifted.

Dash’s eyes shone with amazement. This was the first time in his life that Dastarius had actually tried to spend time with him at all. Before,

the only reason his father had spoken to him or even allowed him to be in his presence was to yell at him. Now was different...Somehow, he actually felt comfortable around Dastarius. The two of them had talked and teased each other like an actual family. They had even joked around about Lolista, a topic that had been taboo back when Dastarius had been alive. In a way, by ‘preparing’ him for danger, Dastarius was actually...taking care of him. Like a real father.

A tentative smile crossed Dash’s face. For the first time, he believed that maybe everything really would work out in the end.

Darkness covered the area. Shadows danced across the craggy walls of the tiny, gritty space. Not even the faintest hint of light trickled into the shadowy prison, making it nearly impossible to see. A skinny tiger lay listlessly on the dark ground, her eyes closed and her fur hanging limply off her body. Her ribs jutted out of her sides and her fur was covered in filth. Her tail lay limply against the ground and her ears were flattened, as if trying to block out some horrible, unheard noise. Blood and bruises covered her legs.

A blinding yellow light suddenly pierced through the darkness as a low rumbling sound rose in the air. With a sharp hiss, the tiger opened her eyes and jerked away from the sudden light, her fur bristling with fear. A dark figure covered in shadows stalked slowly into the room, a menacing aura surrounding him.

The tiger shivered fearfully. “Who are you?”

“That’s not important.” An eerie growl rumbled in the figure’s throat. “What’s important is who *you* are.”

The tiger shivered and shrank away from him, wincing at the tiny movement.

The shadowy figure stepped closer and loomed over her, his voice calm but cold. “Tell me what I want to know and you won’t get hurt again. Now who are you?”

Her voice came out as a choked whisper. “Karenisha.”

The figure chuckled softly. “I take it you come from the forest.”

“Yes.” The tiger nodded absently, her eyes weary and dull. “I was their Queen.”

“Really? You ruled the forest?” When the tiger nodded vaguely, the figure chuckled and licked his lips. “What are you doing out here?”

Karenisha shook her head drearily, her eyes shadowed. “I had to get away.”

“Why?” he growled, raising an eyebrow. “Was there no one there you liked? A family, perhaps?”

Karenisha winced and closed her eyes in defeat. “No. My family is dead.”

Without warning, the piercing yellow light vanished. Shadows swept over the scene like a tidal wave, whisking the tiger and the dark figure away in a swirl of darkness. Horror rose in Saderia’s chest and her mouth gaped open in a silent cry as the scene vanished before her eyes. Blinding light suddenly split through the darkness, stinging Saderia’s eyes and nearly blinding her. A new vision crashed over her, tearing a gasp out of her chest.

Before her eyes could adjust to the sudden light, a wave slammed into her and knocked her paws out from under her. With a cry, she sank beneath the thick liquid. Salt and an eerie metallic taste filled her mouth. Hearing her blood roaring in her ears, she frantically kicked and fought against the wave until her head broke the surface. Gasping for air, she looked around wildly and felt her heart stop in horror. An enormous wave of blood crashed through the sand around her, carrying her along with it. Other animals fought and struggled vainly against the red wave carrying them away.

Far away in the distance stood a sandy land surrounded by oozing lakes of gore. Shadowed figures fought viciously in the center of the dry land, spilling blood on the ground. Vicious howls and snarls rang in the air. Slowly, the last few pieces of sand were swallowed up by blood, along with the howling figures. In the center of the roaring lake of blood stood an enormous rock formation towering high in the sky. At the top of the rock stood a dark figure wreathed in shadows.

In one quick movement, the figure threw back its head and roared with laughter and triumph. “Yes! I won! I finally won! The forest is mine! *Everything is mine!*”

Chapter Thirteen

Facades

“Did you get a good look at the figure that was questioning Karenisha?” Dash looked up anxiously at Saderia as he padded across the boiling, gritty sand, his tail twitching with worry. Concern gleamed in his wide, sunlit amber eyes.

Saderia heaved a long sigh and sadly shook her head, her eyes locked on her paws. “No. I wish I had, but I didn’t.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes in confusion. “This Dream was really strange. I don’t think I’ve ever heard an entire conversation in a Dream before. I guess that vision was just trying to show me what Mom was going through.” Her voice trailed off and a sudden fire as hot as the broiling desert sun blazed in her eyes. “Whoever her captor is, though, he’ll pay. He hurt her! She was bruised and bloody.”

Dash winced and looked away, his eyes pained and worried. Behind them, Jeb gaped at her in horror and froze, while Dingo just gazed grimly down at his paws, his eyes shadowed but unsurprised. Silence swept over them.

After a long moment of hesitation, Dash looked darkly down at his paws, his eyes clouded with pain. “She still thinks we’re dead.”

Saderia let out a long, weary sigh and closed her eyes. “It’s what she believes. I hardly expected that to change.”

Jeb shivered and shrank back in dismay. “Isn’t there any way to help her? I can’t stand the thought of someone being in pain like that.”

Saderia took a deep breath and opened her eyes, their amber depths hollow and pained. “The only thing we can do is keep walking. That’s what Claw told me to do.”

Dash’s eyes flashed mutinously and he looked darkly out at the desert, forgetting he and Saderia weren’t alone. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t trust Claw so much...”

Behind him, Dingo immediately pricked up his ears and froze in place. Shock gleamed in his light brown eyes and he gaped at Dash in disbelief. "What did you say?"

Saderia blinked in surprise and paused to glance back at Dash and Dingo. Behind her, Jeb stopped to look at them in surprise, uneasily creeping closer to Saderia.

Alarm glimmered in Dash's eyes and he froze. Why had that slipped out? Blinking rapidly, he glanced at Saderia and Jeb's surprised faces, then turned nervously back to Dingo, his amber eyes uneasy. "I...I didn't say anything," he stammered.

Dingo bared his fangs and let out a dangerous growl. "If you have something to say, say it."

Dash took a nervous step back. "I...I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean anything..."

Dingo flattened his ears. "You calling my sister a liar?"

"No!" Dash glanced frantically around, as if searching for help. "I just meant..."

"Oh, you just think she's an idiot," Dingo finished, letting out a humorless laugh that ended in a cold growl. "You've got a lot of nerve." His brown eyes flashed with fury and a low growl rumbled in his throat. "She does her best to help you and Saderia, and you have the audacity to say we shouldn't trust her?"

Dash defensively held up a paw, his eyes wide with alarm. "I...I shouldn't have said that in front of you..."

Dingo's eyes blazed with rage and a harsh snarl escaped his throat. "Oh, so it would be okay to insult her behind my back?"

"Dingo!" Saderia hastily stepped toward him and pressed a paw against his shoulder. "I don't think he meant anything. He was just concerned..."

"I don't care." Dingo tore himself away from her and whipped around to glare at her, his eyes blazing. "What reason does he have to distrust my sister? What's she ever done to him?"

Dash gritted his teeth in a flash of anger. "I'm sorry. It's just a little hard to trust her considering that when Saderia thought you were dead, she never once visited her to help her."

“Dash! Dingo!” Saderia nervously flicked her tail. “Stop! Just drop this!”

“That wasn’t her job!” Dingo shouted, furiously lashing his tail. “She isn’t some slave who has to solve all your problems! Besides, that’s Saderia’s issue, not yours! What? Are you calling my sister a traitor just because she didn’t talk to Saderia for a while?”

Fury bubbled in Dash’s chest. Gritting his teeth, he glared at Dingo and let out a hiss. “You call six months a *while*?”

“*Really*, guys, let’s not do this!” Saderia pleaded, her paws shuffling anxiously on the sand as she struggled to put herself between them.

Rage blazed in Dingo’s eyes and a furious snarl rose in his chest. “Claw doesn’t abandon her friends! Whatever she did, she had her reasons!”

Dash gritted his teeth and lashed his tail. “Maybe she did. But it doesn’t even matter! I’m *sorry* about what I said, but it’s not right for you to get so defensive whenever we say a word about Claw! Saderia can never talk about what she says because it’s like we’re walking on glass whenever her name comes up! All you do is hold up progress!”

“That’s not true,” Saderia stammered, giving Dingo a weak, apologetic glance and shooting Dash a warning glare out of the corner of her eye.

Dingo gaped in disbelief. “Well, I’m *sorry* for being so *sensitive* about my dead sister! I didn’t know it was so horrible for you! If it’s that bad, I’m so, so sorry because *obviously* my pain can never compare to your discomfort!” Shaking his head in disbelief, he whipped around to face his friends. “Saderia? Jeb? Do I need to apologize to you too?”

“All right, look!” Dash lashed his tail and growled, his eyes blazing with anger. “All I meant was that Claw might not have *all* the facts, so we should keep our eyes open for...other courses of action. Not that she’s lying or a traitor or anything like that!”

Dingo curled his lip and shook his head in disdain. “What ‘other courses of action’ are there, you idiot? Saderia’s Dreams and my sister’s advice are the only things we’ve got! What? Do you think *you* can come up with a better plan? Can *you* see everything that’s going on in the world? Do *you* know where Karenisha is?”

Dash opened his mouth to reply, then quickly closed it and gritted his teeth. It wasn't as if he could say anything about Dastarius's plan. Glancing down at his paws, he took a deep breath and tried to calm the anger boiling in his chest. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to look back up and reluctantly met Dingo's blazing light brown eyes. "Fine. You're right," he muttered. "I'm sorry, Dingo. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Dingo wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "You disgust me." Curling his lip, he tore his eyes off Dash and stalked ahead of him, pushing roughly past him to take the lead. Ignoring his friends' stunned eyes burning into his back, he flicked his tail sharply to signal for them to follow and stalked past Saderia to lead the way, his ears flat and his eyes narrowed.

Saderia hesitated uncomfortably and cast a quick glance back at Dash and Jeb. A flash of sympathy gleamed in her eyes when she saw the stunned, shell-shocked expression on Jeb's face. Shaking it off, she whipped around and darted through the sand to catch up to Dingo, her amber eyes narrowed with concern. "Dingo? Are you okay?" she murmured, falling into step beside him. "I'm sure Dash didn't mean to hurt you..."

"Yeah, whatever." Dingo gritted his teeth and bitterly looked away, his tail lashing with anger. "Let's just keep moving. That's what Claw told us to do, right? Or do you have some other plan I wasn't aware of?"

Saderia let out a long sigh. "Yes, we should keep walking."

"All right then." Dingo cast her a cool glance, then turned and stalked ahead, his eyes shadowed. "Let's not waste our breath. We've still got a long journey ahead of us."

Saderia heaved a sigh. "All right." She paused wearily, then glanced over her shoulder with dull amber eyes. "Dash! Jeb! Come on! We're going to keep moving!"

Behind her, Dash and Jeb exchanged a long, uncomfortable glance, then slowly rose to their paws and crept toward her. Giving Dingo a dark, wary glance, Dash cautiously fell into step beside Saderia. Dingo didn't even look at him. Uneasily, Jeb crept up behind them and nervously stepped up to walk beside Dash, giving both him and Dingo uneasy glances.

The tiny creature winced and glanced guiltily at Saderia. "I...I'm sorry if I caused this."

Saderia sighed. "It's okay, Jeb. Tensions are just high after all this travel."

Dingo snorted, but didn't say a word. The canine didn't once look at any of them for the rest of the day.

Stars twinkled in the black night sky, creating strange shadows across the sand. Silence hung over the land. With a long, heavy sigh, Dash slumped down on the gritty ground close to Saderia's warm, fluffy side and rested his head tiredly on his paws. Exhaustion swept over him like a wave and his eyelids drooped. "Goodnight," he called, glancing half-heartedly around at his friends.

Saderia closed her eyes and laid her head down on her paws beside him. "Goodnight."

On Saderia's other side, Jeb murmured a quick goodnight, then slowly lowered himself onto the ground, glancing nervously around at his surroundings with uneasy eyes.

Dingo said nothing. Not bothering to look at any of them, he stalked a few paces away from them and flopped down on the dark sand, turning his back to them.

Dash glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, then sighed and looked away, trying to ignore a tingle of guilt in his chest. Closing his eyes, he shook his mane out over his face and tried to relax, hoping for some much-needed sleep. More than anything, he wanted to get to sleep quickly so that he could meet with Dastarius and learn more about his plan. Sleep eluded him, though. Exhaustion dragged him down, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make himself fall asleep. An hour passed and he felt more awake than ever.

Heaving a weary sigh, he opened his eyes and slowly lifted his head. Obviously, something was wrong with him. His gaze drifted toward the place where Dingo had fallen asleep, and a jolt of shock raced through him when he realized the canine was no longer there. Frantically, he whipped around and scanned his surroundings for any sign of Dingo, his fur bristling in alarm and his heart beginning to pound. His gaze raked the sandy ground, then paused on a tall sand dune a few paces away. Dingo sat at the very top of the dune, staring forlornly out at the desert with his back to his sleeping friends.

For a long moment, Dash watched him sit there. After several minutes passed, Dash started to wonder if he had fallen asleep while sitting up until his tail gave the slightest twitch. A heavy sigh escaped Dash's throat and his ears drooped. Guilt burned in his mind. Deep down, he knew guilt was the reason he couldn't sleep and he doubted he would ever get to sleep that night unless he apologized. Annoyance gleamed in his eyes. Sometimes, he really hated his conscience.

Shaking the thoughts out of his head, he rose unsteadily to his paws and reluctantly started to pad toward his canine friend. His paws dragged against the sand. Keeping his eyes locked on his paws, he forced himself to creep silently up the side of the sand dune and paused just a few paces behind his shadowed friend. "Dingo?"

Dingo's ears shot up, but he didn't look back and otherwise ignored Dash. Hardly a surprise.

Dash heaved a sigh. "Dingo? Come on, don't be petty. I just want to apologize."

Dingo simply flicked his tail and ignored him, keeping his back turned to him and his eyes focused on the sky above.

A long, irritated sigh breathed out of Dash's chest. "Look, Dingo, whether you're listening or not...I'm sorry for what I said. It was really out of line, and I shouldn't have said anything about your sister. To your face or otherwise. It was wrong of me. And if you've spent the past few hours plotting ways to kill me, I don't blame you."

A soft chuckle escaped Dingo's throat, so quiet Dash wasn't sure if he had imagined it. A second later, the desert dog glanced back over his shoulder just enough for Dash to see the tight smile on his face and the forgiveness in his light brown eyes. Heaving a sigh, Dingo turned back to gaze out at the desert and lightly flicked his tail. "Don't worry, Dash. I stopped daydreaming about that a few minutes ago."

Dash managed a weak smile. "I see." He paused, then glanced uncomfortably at his paws, tensely aware of the thick silence hanging over the moonlit top of the shadowed sand dune. "Well...I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry and I take back what I said..."

Dingo nodded slowly, never tearing his gaze off the desert. "Okay."

Dash glanced uncomfortably at the ground, then slowly peered up at the starry night sky, trying to find a place to look. "I guess I should, uh, try

to get some sleep now...”

Dingo said nothing. His dreamy, dull brown eyes remained fixed on the stars.

After an awkward moment of hesitation, Dash glanced back and nervously started to back away from him, only to freeze a second later.

“I’m sorry, too,” Dingo murmured, his voice soft and subdued.

Dash blinked and looked back at him in surprise. “For what? I’m the one who said something bad about Claw. You just reacted like anyone would.”

Dingo shrugged, keeping his back turned to him and his eyes locked on the stars. “Maybe. But I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I’m sorry.”

A frown crossed Dash’s face. Dingo’s voice was oddly quiet and distant, as if something was on his mind. It was rare to see Dingo act so troubled. Usually, the canine covered up his feelings with grumpiness. Something must be really wrong...Narrowing his eyes in concern, Dash cautiously stepped up and sat down beside him, studying him closely. A twinge of pain haunted Dingo’s dull, absent eyes, but his expression was as emotionless as ever.

“Dingo?” Dash frowned and watched his friend intently, while Dingo kept his gaze trained absently on the stars. Never did the canine blink. A worried gleam shone in Dash’s narrowed amber eyes. “Are you okay?”

Silence. Not once did Dingo look at him. His gaze remained fixed on the night sky, but his eyes seemed to stare straight past the stars. A long, uncomfortable silence spread out between them, seeming deafening in the thick darkness of the empty land. After what felt like hours, Dingo took a deep breath and let it out slowly, keeping his eyes trained on the sky. “Do you know why it makes me uncomfortable when you talk about Claw? Other than the fact that I miss her?”

Dash blinked in surprise, then frowned and studied him closely. What did he mean? Narrowing his eyes, he slowly shook his head, hoping Dingo would explain.

Another long silence passed between them until Dingo finally spoke up in a soft, distant voice that seemed too loud in the silence of the desert. “Usually, when someone dies, the living don’t talk badly about them, if they talk about them at all. They tend to have respect for the dead.” Dash tensed

and started to apologize, but Dingo cut him off. “They don’t...talk about them as if they were still there, as if they could hear them. They don’t talk about them so lightly.” Slowly, Dingo turned around to face Dash, his eyes glimmering with pain. “Why do you and Saderia talk about Claw as if she’s still alive?”

Dash winced and opened his mouth to apologize, but Dingo sternly cut him off.

“I’m not looking for an apology.” He firmly narrowed his eyes. “I just want to know why.”

Dash opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Blinking rapidly, he studied Dingo’s face curiously, trying to understand what he was getting at, but he could see nothing in the canine’s gaze but pain and darkness. Taking a deep breath, Dash struggled to find the right words. “I guess it’s because...sometimes...it seems like she’s not really dead. Since Saderia talks to her in Dreams, it feels like she’s still alive...even though she’s not.”

Dingo took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly, his dull gaze flicking back toward the stars. “That’s why it hurts when you talk about her.”

Dash blinked in surprise and frowned, waiting uncomfortably for him to explain.

Dingo shook his head and let out a tiny, humorless laugh. “When I hear you and Saderia talking about Claw...when Saderia says something like ‘Claw told me to do this,’ or ‘Claw said we’re on the right track,’ or ‘Claw said we should leave’...it seems like she’s not really dead. Like she’s actually still alive somewhere...somehow.

Dash frowned in bewilderment. “Wouldn’t that make you happy?”

“It did.” Dingo blinked several times, then let out a heavy breath. “At first. I mean...when I first found out that Claw still *existed* somewhere, I was overjoyed. I kept thinking about how she could see me and look after me...It was like she was back from the dead. But now...when I hear you talk about her...it makes me think that she *is* still alive. And I get this hope that I’ll be able to see her, that we’ll be able to talk, that we’ll be able to spend time together just like before...But then I realize...we can’t. Even if she still exists somewhere, she can only visit Saderia. And I can’t ask her to come visit me every night just so I can pretend for a few hours that she’s

alive. That would be unfair to her. So I have to remind myself that even if she's still out there, she's still *dead*."

Dingo heaved a sigh. "There's a part of me that just wants to be happy that she's out there *somewhere*, to ignore the fact that we can't really be together, and to be happy when you guys talk about her. But there's this other part that doesn't want you to talk about Claw because I'm afraid I'll get too attached to this *idea* that she still exists. I have to tell myself not to ask you guys about Claw...or ask Saderia to carry a message to her...or do anything to make it seem like we're actually together again. I have to tell myself not to get too close. I feel like if I hear too much about Claw—if I start to believe that she's *really there*—then I'll get too attached to her. But I can't do that because...because what if she can't visit Saderia anymore? What if something happens and she can't visit or have *something* to do with us? If I lose her again...I just...I just can't do that, Dash."

Dingo heaved a sigh and miserably shook his head. "So then it just brings up all the old pain I felt when she died and I end up feeling horrible even though I know I'm supposed to be happy now." He closed his eyes. "It just drives me crazy..."

Dash blinked in shock and stared at Dingo in incredulity as he squeezed his eyes shut. "Dingo..." Slowly, he shook his head, his eyes wide with guilt. "I'm so sorry..."

Dingo's eyes flew open and blazed fiercely in the dim light. "I don't need your pity," he growled. "I'm merely explaining why it makes me so uncomfortable when you talk about Claw." Giving Dash a long, dark glance, he heaved a sigh and gazed absently up at the stars. "It's my own stupid problem, Dash. I'll work on it. I'll try not to act so weird when you guys talk about Claw. I don't want to stop you two from talking about her and her plans. I want her to be able to help you guys." A sad, wistful smile crept across his face. "She always told me that she wanted a *purpose*. A reason to...live. She wanted to help someone, make a difference, do something to make her life meaningful... Thanks to Bone, she didn't get a chance to do that when she was alive, but now she has that chance and I want her to enjoy it. I don't want her to feel guilty about helping you and Saderia just because I'm selfish and I have issues. I'll learn to deal with it."

Dash rested his tail gently on Dingo's shoulder and tried not to wince. How could Dingo carry around all that pain and always seem so cool

and unburdened? Sympathy shone in his eyes. “Why haven’t you told us about all this? We could have helped you.”

Dingo’s eyes flashed and he stiffly jerked away from him. “You have enough to worry about. Besides...” His gaze hardened and a growl crept into his voice. “I don’t need any help. I can take care of myself and deal with this alone, like I’ve always done.”

Dash heaved a soft, sympathetic sigh. Typical Dingo, always too proud for his own good. “You’re not alone anymore,” he murmured, giving him a sad glance.

Dingo curtly flicked his tail and flattened his ears. “Sometimes I prefer to be.”

Dash sighed and glanced regretfully down at his paws. “Sorry.”

Dingo heaved a long sigh and closed his eyes. “It’s okay.” He paused, then glanced forlornly at Dash out of the corner of his eye. “Well, you just came to apologize so you could get some sleep. I guess you did what you came here to do.”

Dash glanced at his paws and let out a soft breath. “Listen, Dingo... if you need to get this stuff off your chest, I’ll listen.”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “No, I don’t want to bore you or bother you or anything.”

“You won’t.” Dash rested his tail firmly on his shoulder. “Friends help each other. Even if you don’t want my advice—if you just want me to listen—I won’t say a word.”

Dingo frowned and stared at the stars for a long moment before letting out a weary sigh. “All right. There is...one other thing that’s been bothering me.” When Dash pricked his ears, Dingo took a deep breath and slowly let it out, avoiding his eyes. “When I wasn’t thinking about Claw...I was thinking about how she wanted a purpose in life, like I told you. I know that even if she’s not alive, she probably feels like she finally has a purpose. Her one goal was to help someone...to make a difference...and she can finally do that now. But every now and then...I wonder what my purpose is.” A humorless chuckle escaped his throat. “I mean, let’s face it. I haven’t really accomplished much.”

Dash blinked in surprise. “That’s ridiculous. You’ve accomplished plenty. You saved me and Saderia from the dingoes, you got yourself away

from the pack, and you're *still* a *huge* help to us. Without you, we would have no hope of living through this journey."

A wry smile crossed Dingo's face. "I know. I appreciate the sentiments, Dash. I'm not saying I'm not proud of what I *have* done. I *am* glad that I was able to save you guys. But now...it's not like I do anything *that* great. I mean, I'm glad I can still help you guys, but does my purpose in life really boil down to leading forest food across the desert?" He shook his head and let out a mild sigh. "I can just hear my brother laughing now."

Dash narrowed his eyes cautiously. "Whatever your reason to live is, I don't think it has anything to do with proving yourself to your brothers...Or trying to one-up them."

Dingo chuckled warmly. "I know. That's just something I aspire to on the side."

A faint grin crossed Dash's face.

Letting out a soft sigh, Dingo took on a more sober expression. "I don't even know why I think about it. I *am* happy with my life. It's much better now and I'm proud of all the things I've done. I guess it's just that this wasn't the original goal I had for my life, but I don't know why that bothers me so much. My original goal was...impossible."

Dash frowned curiously. "What was it?"

"To change the pack." A grim, sarcastic smile crossed his face and he glanced at Dash out of the corner of his eye. "Stupid, right? Like I said... impossible." His tail twitched distractedly back and forth. "I don't know why, but I guess I still care about the pack. Even though they treated me like dirt. Wait, no. Dirt was actually a rank higher than me," he added, taking on a mock thoughtful expression and rolling his eyes.

Dash managed a tight smile, but his eyes remained clouded with concern.

Heaving a sigh, Dingo gazed down at his paws, his eyes shadowed. "It's just that the rest of you seem so happy. Everyone but me seems to have done what they always dreamed of. Saderia was able to help *everyone* she ever wanted to help, even lost cases like me. *You* were able to save Saderia. Jeb got over some of his fears and made peace with those royal kraguers... sort of. All of you have found friends in each other. But...I never really cared about having friends. The only friend I needed was Claw. Really, the only thing I wanted to do was look after Claw—which didn't exactly work

out—and make the pack a better place.” He rolled his eyes. “Obviously, though, that’s not going to happen. Maybe one of these days, I’ll realize that and actually let myself be happy.” Letting out a soft sigh, he gazed up at the stars, his expression bittersweet. After a long silence, he slowly turned to face Dash, a weak smile on his face. “Anyway, I’ve rambled on enough. You should get to sleep. We need to save our strength for the journey.”

Dash frowned. “Are you sure? I could stay up if you want someone to talk to”

A weak smile crossed Dingo’s face and he slowly shook his head. “No, that’s fine, Dash. I’m perfectly capable of talking to myself. But you were right,” he added, giving him a grateful smile. “Getting that stuff off my chest did help. Thanks.”

Dash tried to return the smile. “No problem. Are you going to sleep, too?”

“I’ll go lie down in a minute,” Dingo replied, flicking his tail apathetically.

“Okay.” Dash hesitated, then gave him a weak smile. “Well... goodnight, Dingo.”

A warm, grateful smile crossed Dingo’s face. “Goodnight, Dash.”

“It’s about time you got here.” The thick darkness surrounding Dash slowly faded away, revealing the cold, hazy dream clearing. Dastarius sat calmly in the center of the ghostly clearing, his tail curled neatly around his paws. The dark lion coolly met his gaze. “What took you so long?”

Blinking rapidly, Dash heaved a sigh and slowly sat back on the wild, wintry grass in front of his father, ignoring the eerie, stark branches reaching out toward him. “Sorry. I had to help my friend. He was really upset.”

Dastarius flicked his tail disinterestedly. “Who? The little Jeb thing?”

“Er, no...” Dash hesitated, then shrugged. “Actually, it was Dingo.”

A faint hint of surprise flickered into Dastarius’s eyes. “Huh. That’s odd. I always thought he was good at hiding his feelings.”

“He is. I had no idea he was upset about anything until we had a fight this morning.” Dash paused, then shuffled his paws uncomfortably. “Did you see that?”

Dastarius cracked a grin. "I did."

Dash scowled and glared at him in annoyance. "And you're *smiling* about it?"

The dark lion let out an annoyed sigh. "My humble apologies," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "What was the canine upset about anyway?"

Dash opened his mouth to answer, then broke off and quickly looked away. "I don't think I should tell you what he told me in confidence." He paused, then narrowed his eyes and shot his father a dry glare. "Oh, and I don't know if you've realized this, but you seem to have this weird inability to call someone by their name."

A grin twitched at the corners of Dastarius's mouth. "I see," he replied, ignoring his last words. A shadow flitted across his face. "You have a lot of loyalty to your friends."

"Of course." Dash frowned and studied him curiously. "They're my friends."

Dastarius merely nodded. "I see. Well, whatever the problem was, I'm sure you solved it. Should we begin our lesson?"

Dash nodded and tried to hide a hint of eagerness. "Sure. What is it?"

Dastarius lightly flicked his tail. "Perhaps it would be fitting for me to teach you how to hide your feelings as well as your friend."

Dash just shrugged. "Okay. That's fine."

A faint gleam lit up Dastarius's amber eyes. "The key is not just putting on a fake expression to try to cover up fear or distress," he began, his voice cool and calm. "A lot of animals can still remotely sense your feelings. You have to make yourself believe that you are at ease in order to make others believe it."

A frown spread across Dash's face. "How would I do that?"

Dastarius lightly flicked his tail. "It's just something that will come to you. You have to project a look of utmost confidence and ease. You must have enough control over yourself to make yourself believe you are at ease. You simply have to trick your mind."

Dash's eyes narrowed in confusion as he tried to make sense of what he said. "I guess I get what you're saying...But I don't know how I could make *myself* believe that I'm happy or at ease when I'm scared or on edge.

That's just...weird." He frowned and glanced curiously up at Dastarius. "Are you sure it can actually be done?"

His father nodded firmly. "Of course."

Dash frowned thoughtfully. "So...is that what Dingo does?"

Dastarius shrugged. "I think he's capable of doing it, but even he has a ways to go. When you stopped to look, you could see his true feelings in his eyes, couldn't you?"

Dash nodded vaguely, his mind whirling. "Yeah..."

A thoughtful gleam glowed in Dastarius's eyes. "If you convince yourself that you are confident and strong—even when in situations where you would normally feel terrified—nobody will be able to read your real feelings. Not even Princess, if you get really good at it."

Dash raised an eyebrow and snickered. "Are you kidding? Saderia has special powers. She can tell what anybody is feeling at the bat of an eyelid."

"Are you sure?" Dastarius calmly met his gaze, a knowing gleam in his amber irises. "She couldn't tell there was something wrong with your friend, could she?"

Dash broke off laughing and blinked in surprise. That was...true.

A sneer crossed Dastarius's face at the sight of his stunned expression. "She couldn't tell what he was feeling because she had no reason to suspect there was anything wrong with him. Your friend has mastered the art of putting on a good façade, even if he hasn't figured out how to convince himself of what he's trying to convince others. Because he didn't show any obvious signs of sadness, Princess didn't stop to see what he was feeling. If she had, she would have figured it out fairly quickly, thanks to her powers. She could figure out anyone's feelings if she stopped to look. But if you were able to convince yourself that you were completely at ease, the Princess would also think you're at ease."

Dash gaped in incredulity. What he said made sense...in a creepy way. Normally, he would never believe that anything could trick Saderia... but this truly could...A frown spread across his face. "How would I...make myself believe I feel something I don't?"

Dastarius smoothly flicked his tail. "How do you convince others? You prove it with actions. You must walk with your head held high and your tail off the ground, sit with your shoulders straight, and look others

dead in the eye when you speak. At first, doing these things will seem difficult, especially if you're feeling unsure, but after a while, it will come naturally. Eventually, your original feelings will disappear from your mind and you'll have convinced yourself to feel a certain way."

Dash flicked his tail uncertainly. "Okay..."

Dastarius met his eyes with glowing amber irises. "Is there anything in your life that you believe in so completely that you never doubt it?"

"Saderia," Dash replied instantly, speaking before he even had time to think.

His father nodded thoughtfully. "Well, then you just have to put as much faith in yourself as you put in her. Doing that should work."

Dash skeptically narrowed his eyes. "If it's that easy, why hasn't Dingo figured it out yet? He's the one who seems to be good at this stuff."

Dastarius shrugged. "I never said it was easy. As for your friend, I think he just likes pain. He's one of those animals that can never let themselves be happy."

Dash winced, then let out a sigh. "All right. But I still don't know if I can do this."

Dastarius sneered. "Then you've got to make yourself believe you can."

Dash scowled at him, but nodded anyway. "All right, fine. I'll try it."

"Good." A satisfied sneer crossed Dastarius's face and he slowly rose to his paws. "In that case, my work here is done...for now. Practice these things in real life until our next meeting. And for the record, you are improving." His eyes twinkled with a proud, knowing gleam. "This whole time, you've managed to sit up straight and look me the eye. Nice work." Giving him a nod, the dark lion turned and stalked toward the shadowy woods, his tail flicking calmly back and forth. A second later, he vanished from sight.

Harsh sunlight shone down from the cloudless light blue sky, burning Dash's eyes the second they fluttered open. Wincing, he squinted against the piercing yellow light and stumbled hazily to his paws, blinking sleep out of his eyes and shaking hot, gritty sand out of his fur.

“Hi, Dash!” The friendly voice jolted Dash out of his thoughts and made his eyes fly open in surprise. Relief washed over him when he spotted Saderia standing on the sand a few paces away from him, a warm smile on her face.

She gave him a friendly wave. “I’m glad you’re up. We’ve been waiting for you to wake up.”

Embarrassment rose in Dash’s chest. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

“It’s okay.” Saderia flicked her tail to wave away his apology. “We tried waking you up, but you were really, *really* asleep, so we just let you rest.”

Dash opened his mouth to reply, but a loud, friendly howl erupted from somewhere behind him, cutting him off.

“Hey, is the slacker up yet?”

Whirling around, Dash narrowed his eyes in an indignant glare. A few paces away, Dingo bounded down the side of a sand dune, his tongue lolling out of his mouth and his paws throwing up clouds of sand behind him. When he skidded to a halt in front of Saderia, gritty sand flew up in all directions, stinging Dash’s face. A relieved glow lit up Dingo’s light brown eyes and a warm smile crossed his face, making Dash blink in surprise. The last time he had seen Dingo, he had hardly seemed so happy or unburdened.

Dingo raised an eyebrow and grinned when he spotted Dash. “So you’re *finally* up, huh? Jeez, we thought we would have to wait another week!”

Dash shot him a playful glare. “Is it my fault I’m tired, considering I get *pounced awake* every morning?”

Dingo snickered and grinned. “Hey, *you* started it!”

An anxious frown crossed Saderia’s face and she glanced nervously back and forth between them, then let out a sigh of relief when she realized they were getting along. “I take it you didn’t see anyone out there,” she cut in, glancing at Dingo.

Dingo nodded seriously. “I didn’t see any dingoes out there.”

Dash’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Dingoes?”

Standing close beside Saderia, Jeb shivered. “Yeah, Dingo said we were getting deeper into their territory.”

Dingo shrugged and flicked his tail. "Well, it has been...what? Five days that we've been out here? I'm kind of surprised we haven't run into any yet."

Saderia let out a long sigh. "Let's hope our luck stays."

"Yeah," Dash murmured, his voice absent and subdued.

Dingo flicked his tail and glanced around at them. "Well? Are we ready to go?"

Saderia nodded eagerly, her worry vanishing. "You bet. Let's get moving."

A faint smile crossed Dingo's face. Giving her a warm nod, he turned and bounded off to lead the way. Saderia and Jeb fell into step behind him and began their trek through the sand. Following after them, Dash narrowed his eyes and studied Dingo intently. Not even the slightest hint of sadness or distress darkened his bright light brown eyes. A frown creased Dash's face. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at Saderia and felt a jolt of surprise shoot through him. From the calm, cheerful expression on her face, he could tell that she couldn't sense anything was wrong with Dingo.

Bewilderment glowed in Dash's eyes. Long ago, Saderia had told him that she had sensed something was off about Dastarius when he had been alive. Back then, she hadn't even been aware of her special senses. Usually, Saderia didn't even need to recognize that something was wrong. Her instinct naturally gave her hints of what others were feeling. Now she couldn't even sense what Dingo was thinking. Someone had actually managed to fool Saderia...Had Dingo pulled off the trick Dastarius had tried to teach him?

Surprise glimmered in Dash's eyes. Before, he had always thought *Dastarius* was the master of disguise. Now he was beginning to think he had just been dethroned.

Chapter Fourteen

Outcasts

“So what were you dreaming about last night?” Saderia’s soft voice shattered Dash’s thoughts, making him jump in surprise. Blinking rapidly, he whirled around and found himself staring right into Saderia’s eyes. The lion blinked several times. Only then did he realize she had fallen back to walk beside him, letting Dingo and Jeb take the lead to guide them across the boiling light brown sand.

A bewildered frown spread across his face. “What?”

Saderia giggled playfully. “I asked you what you were dreaming about last night.”

Dash blinked in confusion, then felt a wave of cold fear crash over him, raising the fur on his back. How had Saderia known he had been dreaming? Had she guessed his dreams were more than just normal nightmares? Shaking himself forcefully, he tried to ignore his unease and act normal. The chances of Saderia finding out about his meetings with his father were slim to none. Her bright amber eyes didn’t seem suspicious. Only a mild hint of curiosity lit up her sunlit gaze.

“Oh...er, I don’t know.” Taking a silent breath, Dash forced himself to meet her eyes, knowing that if he avoided her gaze, it would only make him look suspicious. Whenever he had tried to lie to her in the past, he had always looked away. Only now did he realize that. Saderia had probably realized it long ago. “I don’t really remember,” he murmured, trying to keep his tone as nonchalant as possible. He paused, then frowned. “You could tell I was dreaming? What? Was I...talking in my sleep or something?”

Saderia giggled. “No, nothing like that. It’s just that when I tried to wake you, you were so deeply asleep you didn’t even move. You must have had an intense dream.”

Dash just shrugged and managed a weak smile. “This trip is just tiring, I guess.”

“It is. But we *have* been traveling for five days, so hopefully we’ll find something to help us soon. Like...” She hesitated, then trailed off, casting an uneasy glance at Dingo.

“Like Claw said we would?” Dingo glanced calmly back over his shoulder and met her gaze with cool light brown eyes. “I hope you’re right. I don’t know what we’re meant to find, but I’ll keep my eyes open.”

Saderia blinked in surprise at his unbothered tone, then smiled warmly. “Thanks.”

Jeb frowned nervously. “What exactly are we going to do? Are we going to just start searching the desert for your Mom? Or are we going to go back to my forest to look for clues?”

A frown spread across Saderia’s face. “I’m not sure. I think we should go to the edge of your forest just to see if we can figure out which direction my Mom might have gone. Other than that, though, there’s not much else we can do. Except keep our eyes open...”

Dash rested his tail gently on her shoulder. “Didn’t we find Dingo in the desert so long ago? You used your instinct to find him.”

Hope lit up her eyes and she nodded thoughtfully. “That’s true. I haven’t sensed where Mom might be so far, but...maybe I could use my instinct to find her.”

Dingo instantly stopped and sat back on the gritty sand, watching Saderia with curious light brown eyes. Mystified, Jeb slowly sat down beside him. Dash sat back with them, offering Saderia a weak smile. Gazing around at her friends, Saderia slowly sat down on the hot sand and took a deep breath, trying to remember how to use her instinct. A wry smile crossed her face when she remembered what had happened when she had tried to use her instinct to find her way out of the desert back when she and Dash had first gotten lost. Instead of one clear path, she had sensed two paths in opposite directions, one leading to her family and one leading to Dingo. Hopefully, this time wouldn’t be quite as confusing.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let the world disappear around her. The sand dunes, the burning sun, and her friends’ curious stares faded away. Her thoughts focused solely on her mother—what she looked like, what she was thinking, and where she might be. Everything else disappeared until she felt like she was floating in a dark void. A decade seemed to pass in a single second as her instinct searched

the desert for any sign of her mother. After what felt like ages, her instinct tugged at her as it finally picked out a path to Karenisha. Unfortunately... there just so happened to be two of them.

A low, frustrated hiss escaped Saderia's chest. Was there some kind of curse on the desert that made finding *anyone* impossible? Heaving a sigh, she focused intently on the two eerie paths, struggling to figure out which one to take. Cold dread swept over her when she mentally drew closer to one vague path. Shivering, she leaned toward the other indistinct path and felt the ominous sense of danger ease up, if only slightly. Her eyes fluttered open.

Instantly, her friends leaned in toward her, their eyes wide with curiosity.

"Well?" Dash gazed at her in wonder. "Did you sense anything?"

Saderia blinked, then gazed absently around the desert, her eyes distant. "Sort of..."

"How?" Jeb blinked and gaped at her in incredulity. "What just happened? You just...sat there and didn't move or breathe. It was like you disappeared for a second."

"She did. Mentally, at least." A glimmer of hope lit up Dash's eyes as he studied Saderia. "That means you sensed something, right?"

Saderia gave him a weak nod, her eyes dull and distracted.

Dingo's eyes narrowed curiously. "So you know which way to go?"

Saderia heaved a long sigh and shook herself out of her dreamy state. "Not exactly. I mean, I have an idea, but..." She paused, then rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Actually, I have two ideas."

Dash's eyes widened in dismay. "There were two different paths *again*?"

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "I never did have much luck finding someone in the desert." Rolling her eyes, she gazed out at the sand dunes, her mind whirling with confusion. Which way should she go? One path clearly seemed more dangerous than the other. In a way, it almost felt as if her instinct had specifically tried to warn her away from that path. A shiver crept down her spine at the thought of the ominous warning. Maybe it would be best to take the path that held the lesser threat. After all, she hardly wanted to endanger her friends. Although...the other path still *had*

held a distinct threat of danger—an eerie warning that was weaker than that of the other path but still strong enough to give her pause...

Her eyes narrowed in indecision, but after a long moment of hesitation, she let out a soft breath and shook the thoughts out of her head. The four of them would take the path with the lesser threat. It was the only course of action she could see working out for them. "I think we should go that way," she murmured, gesturing vaguely in one direction.

Dingo glanced in the direction she had pointed and shrugged. "Okay." Rising quickly to his paws, he turned to walk in the direction she had indicated, taking the lead.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia stumbled to her paws and padded after Dingo. Behind her, Dash and Jeb leapt to their feet and raced after her to fall into step beside her. A glimmer of worry lit up Saderia's eyes as she followed Dingo across the boiling hot sand, and a dull sense of worry and disquiet rose in her chest. More than anything, she hoped she had chosen the right path. If she hadn't, the consequences might be dire...

Hours dragged by slowly. Sunlight scorched Saderia's fur and the boiling sand stung her raw paw pads, making her paws burn with pain at every step. Her vision blurred with exhaustion and her head drooped with every step she took. Her muscles ached and the yellow pack on her shoulder seemed too heavy even though it didn't hold that much food. Worry still haunted her cluttered thoughts, but she pushed it away and forced herself to focus on traveling and keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary.

It didn't take long for her to find just that.

Without warning, Dingo froze in a dead halt, his ears pricking up in surprise and his eyes narrowing. A shadow flitted across his face and his brown eyes darkened with unease. Looking up sharply, Saderia stopped abruptly behind him and frowned in confusion at the strange, unnerving expression on his face. Frowning, she opened her mouth to ask if something was wrong, but Dingo clamped a paw roughly over her muzzle before she could speak, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Giving her a long, warning look, Dingo slowly pulled his paw away and rigidly turned around to gaze out at the vast dunes before him. Without a word, Saderia crept up beside him and squinted in the same direction

Dingo was staring. A jolt of shock shot through her when she made out two hazy canine figures lying on the sand just a few feet away, unmoving.

Unease colored her eyes and her gaze darkened. "Dingoes?"

Dingo nodded grimly, his eyes shadowed and grave.

Dash silently crept up to stand beside Dingo and darkly flattened his ears when he spotted the shaggy figures lying in the sand. "We should get out of here."

Jeb shivered and crept toward Dingo to cower behind him. "Are they dangerous?"

"Very." Dingo paused, then frowned, his eyes narrowing in confusion. "Something's wrong, though. They look...awfully skinny. Skinnier than me."

Saderia frowned and narrowed her eyes to study the faraway dingoes intently. Vaguely, she realized that the figures seemed about as skinny as Dingo, but she didn't understand why it mattered. Frankly, she didn't want to understand. All she wanted to do was get far, far away. Desert travel had taught her one thing above all else: dingoes were dangerous.

A dark, uneasy shadow crossed Dingo's face. "They're so still... Normally, dingoes don't fall asleep outside of camp..."

Jeb's eyes widened in horror. "Are they *dead*?"

Dingo's frown deepened. "I don't know..." He studied the dingoes intently, then narrowed his eyes in determination. "You three stay here. I'm going to go look."

"*What?*" Saderia frantically leapt in front of him to stop him, her eyes wide with shock. "Are you *insane*? We can't just go walking up to two dingoes! That's just asking for death!"

"Something is wrong," Dingo repeated, his voice a low growl. "And I want to know what." His eyes darkened and he quickly looked away, his face shadowed. "You three can stay here. If those dingoes *are* dangerous, just run. I'll catch up to you later."

A shiver raced through Saderia. The last time Dingo had said those words, he had nearly ended up dead. A dark shadow flitted across her face and she let out a soft, cold hiss, her ears flattening. "I've heard that before, and it was a lie."

Dingo's gaze softened and he let out a quiet sigh. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." He paused, then glanced back at the canines and narrowed his eyes. "Really, though, there are only two of them and they might not even be alive. I'm just going to get a closer look. If they *are* alive, I'll just run back to you guys. Okay?"

She narrowed her eyes, then gave a curt nod. "Fine. But we're coming with you." Before he could protest, she gave him a stern glare. "If you can go near them, so can we."

Dingo heaved a reluctant sigh. "Fine. Let's go." Tearing his gaze off Saderia, he turned around and slowly crept toward the dingoes, being careful not to make a sound.

Casting a quick glance back at Dash and Jeb, Saderia flicked her tail to signal for them to follow, then hastily fell into step behind Dingo, not saying a word. Behind her, Dash and Jeb exchanged a long, nervous glance, then slowly followed behind them. A nervous gleam haunted Jeb's wide blue and green eyes, but he said nothing. Dash merely narrowed his eyes and crept closer to Saderia, eyeing the two dingoes warily.

Slowly and silently, the four friends crept closer to the dingoes. A low, harsh wheezing sound floated over to Saderia's ears as they inched across the gritty, heated sand toward the hazy dune where the blurry, still figures lay. With a jolt of surprise, she realized the grating noise was the sound of their wheezing breath. Narrowing her eyes, she crept closer to the dingoes until she stood just a few inches away from them and felt her heart skip with shock.

The two dingoes lying in the sand really *were* skinny. Not just skinny either... gaunt. Malnourished. Skin and bones. Their ribs poked out of their sides at grotesque angles and their scruffy fur was tangled and coated in a grimy layer of grease and dirt. Both of them looked like they hadn't bathed in weeks. The bottoms of their paws were cracked and spattered with wet, sand-speckled blood. Dozens of scars covered their frail bodies and dried blood clung to their filthy fur. Shock gleamed in Saderia's eyes. Dingo was right. Something *was* wrong...unless this was just another example of typical pack behavior.

Exchanging a long, horrified glance with Dingo, she slowly crept closer to the scrawny dogs. Dash and Jeb hung back to watch, their eyes wary. Whimpering with unease, Jeb hid behind Dash, while Dash just

looked on grimly. Not noticing them, Dingo slunk closer to the gaunt canines and inspected them carefully, his eyes shadowed.

“They’re *alive*,” Saderia whispered, her voice soft with amazement.

“Just barely, by the looks of them.” Dingo paused next to one of the dingoes and leaned down to study his yellow brown face. Shock gleamed in his eyes. “*Thunder?*”

Saderia blinked in confusion. “Who’s Thunder?”

“He’s Rock’s Second in Command,” Dingo muttered, his voice absent.

All the fur on Saderia’s back rose up in alarm. Dingoes were dangerous enough as it was, but dingoes with power were always ten times worse. But what was the pack Leader’s Second in Command doing in this condition? A bewildered, uneasy frown crossed her face. Narrowing her eyes, she paced closer to look down at the scrawny yellow brown dog.

Dingo gave him a soft nudge on the shoulder. “Thunder,” he hissed, giving him another gentle shake. The Second in Command didn’t stir.

A shadow of disquiet flitted across Saderia’s face. Frowning, she looked away from Thunder and let her gaze rest on the creamy yellow dingo lying beside him. The filthy yellow dog seemed even skinnier than Thunder. “Who’s that?” she whispered.

Dingo spared a distracted glance at the skinny yellow dog. “That’s Lightning.” He paused, his eyes flicking toward something beyond Thunder’s still body. Shock shone on his face and his eyes widened in dismay. “Oh no...” Biting his lip, he stepped around the Second in Command and leaned down toward the ground, his eyes shadowed with dread.

Blinking in surprise, Saderia hesitantly crept around Thunder to follow Dingo and felt her eyes widen in shock. A muted gasp escaped her throat when she saw what he had seen. A pure black dingo pup no bigger than Maeta’s niece, Tawny, lay on her side, her eyes closed and her paws splayed out at all angles. Hoarse breaths escaped her throat. Her black fur was tangled and matted and tiny ribs poked out of her gaunt sides. Dried blood speckled her shredded paw pads. Saderia’s paw flew to her mouth and her eyes widened in horror. This wasn’t a fully-grown, evil dingo. This was a pup.

Fear clouded her eyes and her voice came out as a tense whisper. "Is she...okay?"

Dingo leaned over the pup and gently ran his paw over her matted side, checking for any serious injuries. "Not really," he muttered. "But she's alive."

At the sound of his voice, the pup's eyes suddenly flew open, revealing brilliant amber irises. With a shaky gasp, she leapt to her paws and staggered away from Dingo, her black fur bristling in alarm. A grating snarl rumbled in her throat and she bared her fangs in fury. "Who are you?" she demanded. "And what are you doing here?" Her paws wobbled, but she gritted her teeth and forced herself to stand. "Are you on *his* side? Because if you are, I'll *kill* you!"

Dingo blinked in surprise. "Whose side?"

"Rock's!" the tiny pup spat, her fur bristling with rage. "Who else?"

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. "Rock? No...I'm not on his side..."

"Well, you're not one of us!" The pup bared her fangs and narrowed her eyes in hostility. "I've never seen you in our camp. Besides, you're too fat to be one of us!"

Dingo blinked in bewilderment and started to respond, then broke off in alarm. One of the dingoes behind the pup stirred and slowly lifted his head, seeming disoriented. Everyone took a nervous step back as the skinny yellow brown dingo staggered to his paws. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, Thunder gazed around and froze when he caught sight of Saderia. "Forest food?" His dark brown eyes widened in surprise. "What the heck?"

The Second in Command blinked several times, as if he thought he was seeing things, then swung around to look back at the tiny pup behind him. His eyes widened when he saw who stood behind him and he stumbled back a few paces in shock. Letting out a gasp, he gaped at Dingo in a mixture of horror and disbelief. "Dingo? I...I..." He shook his head wildly, as if unable to believe his eyes. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"Well...I'm not..." Dingo frowned and cautiously took a step back, his eyes dark and wary. "I don't want any trouble, Thunder."

Thunder blinked several times, then whirled around to stare at Saderia and Dash. His eyes widened with recognition and he gaped in shock. "Those are your forest food..." Blinking rapidly, he swung around and gazed at Dingo in incredulity. "It really is you..."

Dingo nodded uncomfortably and took another small step back.

Thunder's eyes flicked to his paws at the movement. Shakily, he stepped back and held up a bloody paw. "I won't give you any trouble. So long as you do the same for us."

Dingo blinked and stared at him in shock and utter bewilderment. "What?" He gaped at Thunder in disbelief. "You're actually letting me go without a fight? I thought I was the pack's number one enemy! I thought every dingo in the pack wanted to kill me!"

Thunder winced and grimly looked away. "'*In the pack*' are the operative words."

Dingo blinked in surprise, then slowly sat back on the sandy ground. Understanding dawned in his light brown eyes. "You're an outcast."

Thunder's dark brown eyes flicked up to his face and he gave him a grave nod.

Dingo's eyes narrowed in confusion and he eyed Thunder warily. "How did that happen? I thought you were Rock's Second in Command. Why would he exile *you*?"

Thunder started to reply, then broke off when the yellow dingo beside him stirred.

Slowly, the sleek yellow canine lifted his head and gazed around in bewilderment, his yellow eyes clouded with exhaustion. The pitch black pup still bristling in front of Thunder looked up sharply and hastily darted to the yellow dingo's side. Flattening her ears, the pup pressed close to the yellow dingo and anxiously hissed something in his ear when he leaned down toward her. The yellow dingo's eyes widened in shock. Stumbling frantically to his paws, he whipped around and staggered back in disbelief. "What the...? *Dingo*? Am...Am I *dead*?"

Dingo slowly shook his head. "No, Lightning, you're alive."

Lightning blinked several times and gaped at him in shock. "If I'm not dead, how can you possibly be here? Aren't you supposed to be...?"

"He's not dead." Thunder glanced back at Lightning with shadowed dark brown eyes and let out a low, humorless chuckle. "Looks like Rock wasn't crazy, after all."

Lightning blinked several times, then unconsciously pulled the black pup closer to him, his yellow eyes narrowing with unease. "Well...we don't want any trouble..."

“Relax,” Thunder murmured, resting his tail reassuringly on his companion’s shoulder. “It’s Dingo, remember? I don’t think he’ll hurt us. At least, I don’t think so...” The yellow brown dingo hesitated, then cast a wary glance at Dingo, as if doubting his own words.

Dingo took a deep breath. “I won’t lay a paw on you unless you attack first.”

Thunder heaved a soft sigh and slowly relaxed. “All right.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes curiously. “So if you haven’t been dead, where *have* you been?”

Dingo shrugged uncomfortably and avoided his eyes. “I got out of the desert.”

“I see.” Thunder’s gaze flicked knowingly toward Saderia and Dash. “Well, I see you’re still hanging around with the forest food. I assume you went to live with them?”

Dingo coolly narrowed his eyes. “Maybe I have. Either way, they’re not food.”

Thunder’s eyes widened in alarm and he frantically held up a paw. “Sorry. It’s just force of habit. I’ll say forest *animals* from now on.”

Dingo blinked in surprise. Since when did a dingo apologize for anything? Most dingoes barely even knew what the word ‘sorry’ meant. “Er, okay...” He paused, then studied Thunder curiously, his eyes narrowed with wonder. “Why were you exiled?”

Thunder winced and sighed. “It was...rebellion. That’s what Rock exiled me for.”

A frown creased his face. “Rebellion? You never seemed one to rebel.”

“Yes, I was a follower. I know.” Thunder’s eyes darkened and he let out a long, weary sigh. “It wasn’t anything big. It’s not like I attacked Rock or anything like that.”

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes in bewilderment. “If you didn’t attack him, then what exactly did you do that was so horrible it made Rock exile you?”

A dark, humorless chuckle escaped Thunder’s throat. “Apparently, you’ve been gone too long. These days, it doesn’t take much to get exiled.” Letting out a soft sigh, he shook his head and looked away in shame. “Like I said, it wasn’t anything major that got me exiled. I just...Well, when

Bone, er...*died*, Rock just...completely took over. Even before Dagger died, he acted like he ran the place. When Dagger did get killed, though, Rock became the sole Leader of the pack. I...I never expected him to pick *me* as Second in Command. It was a complete shock, but I was really excited about it...for a few days, at least.”

A grim shadow flitted across Dingo’s face. “What happened? What did he do?”

Thunder shook his head slowly, his eyes distant. “It was...sick. It didn’t start out that bad, but it just got worse and worse. Eventually, it started to bother me. When Rock first took over, things were normal at first, but then he got a big head. He ordered that we all move to a whole new camp—a place in the desert where there was an enormous den of rock that was big enough for him to look down on us from the top. Anyone who protested the move was exiled. After we moved into this great new camp, Rock got the huge den and the other dingoes were left with the tiny rock dens in the sand. Only there weren’t nearly enough for all of us. Only his favorites were allowed to have the few dens that were there.

“Soon, everyone started clamoring to get into Rock’s good graces and that started all kinds of fights...Everyone in the pack just started killing everyone else every day, and Rock just allowed it. It amused him to watch them fight. Then he went really mad with power. If any dingo dared to disobey him *once* or did anything to annoy him, he exiled them. Too many times, he had me lead a bunch of dingoes out into the desert to attack the outcasts. He told me not to kill them, just to leave them wounded so they would either die from their injuries or be too weak to support themselves until their life slipped away.”

Dingo let out a heavy sigh and put a paw to his forehead. “Jeez...”

Thunder sighed and gazed darkly down at his paws. “For a while, I just did what I was told. At first, I did it because I thought it was right. Later, I did it because I was terrified to speak out...You don’t know what he did to those outcasts...” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “But then I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t sleep at night. All I felt was guilt. So one time, I tried to tell Rock that maybe we should just leave the outcasts alone for a little while and maybe stop exiling so many dingoes. He didn’t listen. From then on, it just got worse. Eventually, I got desperate and I couldn’t take it anymore, so I tried to make a plan to kill him and end this madness.

Before I even had a chance, though, Rock found out and I was exiled.” He rolled his eyes. “Not exactly an impressive story.”

Dingo frowned and studied him curiously, a cautious expression on his face. “So...you actually think the pack is evil now? You actually...”

“What? Believe you now?” His eyes darkened gravely. “Yes, I guess I’m ‘different’ now, like you. I don’t care. I just wish it hadn’t taken me this long to realize you were right.”

Dingo blinked in shock. No dingo had ever told him he was right about anything.

Thunder heaved a gloomy sigh. “I wish I could have seen just how messed up the pack was a long time ago. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before. I mean...they kill each other for fun. They push dingoes and outcasts into the Snake Pit for entertainment!”

Dingo winced and shuddered at the mention of the Snake Pit. A gleam of shock shone in his eyes despite his discomfort. Seeing Thunder, a former pack member—a former Second in Command, no less—thinking the way he thought was incredible.

Sympathy gleamed in Thunder’s eyes. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything about the Snake Pit. I know that’s a sensitive topic for you.”

Dingo started to wave away his apologies, then froze, his eyes widening in surprise. “Wait a minute...” His eyes flicked to Thunder’s face and his light brown irises glowed with bewilderment. “How do *you* know the Snake Pit is a sensitive topic?”

Alarm shimmered in Thunder’s eyes. “I’m sorry...I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Dingo blinked several times and stared at him in shock. “So...you know that...?”

“That Bone pushed Claw into the Snake Pit?” A shadow crossed his face and he nodded grimly. “Yes, I know. Rock knew and he told me when I was Second in Command.”

Shock glowed in Dingo’s eyes and his mouth gaped open in disbelief. Never would he have thought that *any* dingo would ever believe him about what had happened to his sister. The thought that an old pack member—someone who had always followed the pack’s cruel ways without a thought—now knew of both the pack’s cruelty *and* Bone’s felt almost surreal. Other than Claw, he had always thought that no dingo would ever

think like him. For years, he had thought he was destined to be alone in his opinion forever...

"I don't blame you for killing him," Lightning spoke up, shattering Dingo's thoughts. The yellow dog let his eyes flick to Dingo's face, then quickly looked away, his voice soft and subdued. "Bone, I mean." He paused, then gravely narrowed his eyes. "If anyone ever tried to hurt my sister, I would kill them, too."

Dingo's ears pricked up in surprise. "I didn't know you had a sister."

"I didn't. Not until recently." He hesitated, then glanced down at the tiny pup sitting at his feet. A weak smile crossed his face. "This is Bunny. She was born six months ago."

Dingo blinked and stared at the pup in amazement. Bunny shuffled closer to Lightning and studied Dingo curiously, her amber eyes narrowed with suspicion. Meeting her gaze, Dingo tried to smile, but his heart ached with dismay. "Is she an outcast, too?" he whispered, his voice lined with pain. Had Rock really exiled a six-month-old pup?

A shadow flitted across Lightning's face. "Yes. She went out into the desert to hunt one day and met up with a starving outcast. She gave him the food she had caught, but Rock caught her. He killed the outcast in front of her and exiled her for being too nice to him."

Dingo winced and shuddered with horror. "That's awful."

"I know." Lightning heaved a sigh and pulled Bunny closer to him, his eyes dull.

Pain glimmered in Dingo's eyes when he glanced down at the tiny pup. Looking at her was almost painful. Her entire body was so gaunt and underfed, she looked like a skeleton covered in black fur. Taking a deep breath, he slowly looked up and met Lightning's gaze. "What about you? What did you do to get exiled?"

Lightning's yellow eyes darkened and he glanced down at Bunny. "I exiled myself the day my sister was exiled...I couldn't just leave her alone to fend for herself."

"That's sweet." All four dingoes looked up in surprise when Saderia spoke up, as if only just remembering that she was still there. Sympathy and sorrow gleamed in Saderia's eyes as she gazed down at the undernourished pup. "I can't believe Rock exiled a pup..."

Dingo blinked several times. Somehow, he had forgotten she was there. Being among his own kind made him feel oddly relieved and even... happy. Especially since they weren't attacking him and actually believed him. It felt as if he was among allies.

Thunder's eyes flicked dully to Saderia's face. "I see you and your forest food—er, friends—are doing well. It looks like you're well-fed, wherever you're living."

Saderia's heart ached with pain at the sight of his desperate face and gaunt belly. Helplessly, she wondered if there was anything she could do to help the outcasts, then felt her heart skip with hope and her eyes light up when an idea flickered into her mind. Quickly, she wriggled the strap of her food pack over her head and let the pack fall to the ground.

Bunny's wide eyes darted to the pack and her eyes shone with curiosity. "What's that?" Before her brother could protest, she leapt away from Lightning and bounded toward Saderia, skidding to a halt in front of the food pack. Cautiously, she poked at it with a paw, then looked up at Saderia, her eyes round with wonder. "What's in there?"

"Bunny!" Lightning sharply lashed his tail. "Don't go up to strangers! You could be hurt!"

Bunny snorted scornfully. "Relax. It's just forest food. They can't hurt me."

Lightning sighed and put a paw to his forehead. "Not all forest food are nice."

Bunny scoffed and rolled her eyes. "How many pieces of forest food are there going to be in the desert anyway?" Before Lightning could scold her, Bunny whipped around and faced Saderia with a cool, impatient expression. "Anyway, you heard me. What's in there?"

Saderia knelt down to unzip the pack, giving her a weak smile. "Food. Not the kind you're used to," she added, seeing her eyes widen with hope. "It's from the forest."

Bunny's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Is it poisonous?" When Saderia shook her head, the pup's eyes lit up with hope. "Then can I have some? Please! I'm so hungry!"

A faint, sad smile crossed Saderia's face. "Of course." Trying to hide the grief in her eyes, she leaned down and pulled a juicy piece of food out of the pack, then set it down in front of the pup.

Behind her, Lightning cast a worried glance at Dingo out of the corner of his eye. “That food *is* safe, right?”

Dingo nodded slowly, making Lightning let out a long, relieved sigh. Saderia spared a quick glance at the two desert canines, then glanced back down at the pup.

Narrowing her eyes, Bunny grabbed the food and took a cautious bite. Chewing it slowly, she paused, then grinned, her eyes shining with excitement. “It’s good!”

A weak smile crossed Saderia’s face. “I’m glad you like it.” She paused, then hesitantly looked up at Thunder. “If you want...you could take some food with you...”

Instantly, Thunder held his head high and flattened his ears defensively. “That’s kind of you, but we don’t need your charity. We’re perfectly capable of getting our own food.”

“But it’s not easy.” A dark, knowing gleam shone in Dingo’s eyes. “I was an outcast, too, remember? The most hated outcast in the desert, for that matter. I know how hard it is to try to avoid the pack and find food. Now, it seems it’s gotten even worse.” He gestured to the food pack and gave Thunder a dark, serious look. “If you take a bit of food now, it will help you keep your strength up so that you can look for more food later.”

Thunder narrowed his eyes uncertainly. “Don’t you need it for yourselves?”

Saderia quickly shook her head. “I know where we can go to get more food if we run out. There’s plenty of food growing on the trees on the outskirts of the forests. In fact, if you need more food, you can go there, too. Just don’t drink the water in the eastern forest—that *is* poisonous.”

Thunder groaned. “At this point, I would love to go to one of the forests, but it’s too dangerous. Rock’s got the border between both forests and the desert guarded at all times. It’s nearly impossible to find an opening.” His eyes glimmered sympathetically. “If that’s where you’re headed, you probably won’t have much luck getting into either of the forests.”

Dingo blinked in surprise. “I thought Rock only did that so he could catch me.”

Thunder sighed and rolled his eyes. “It started out that way. But then Rock realized the forests were a fairly safe place for outcasts to find food—

or move to. So now he has dingoes guard the border of the weird forest at all times. I'm pretty sure there are guards around your forest, too," he added, glancing at Saderia. "I'm surprised you made it out alive actually. I guess you were just lucky enough to find a break in their defenses."

Saderia blinked several times, then shared a long, knowing look with Dingo. Luck wasn't what had saved them. Though Claw hadn't specifically told her about the guards on the border, she had probably known about it. The fact that she hadn't protested to the time and date Saderia had chosen probably meant that she had known the guards wouldn't be around at that particular time. Otherwise, she would have stopped them.

"Yeah," she murmured. "Lucky." She paused, then gave Thunder a weak smile. "I think we could find a way to get into the forest. We'll be fine. You can have the food."

Thunder's gaze flicked to Bunny, who sat nibbling eagerly on a tiny piece of food. His dark eyes remained guarded and unsure, but a faint glimmer of hope flickered across his face. Taking a deep breath, he gave them a weak nod. "Only a few pieces. Just enough to give the outcasts back at camp the strength to hunt...or hang in there one more day."

Saderia nodded weakly and bit back the urge to ask questions about the outcasts. Carefully, she pulled out several pieces of food until she had nearly emptied her bag and handed them to the outcast. Her eyes narrowed in dismay at what seemed like only a minimal amount of food and she gave Thunder an apologetic glance. "Is this enough?"

Thunder's eyes widened in shock. "That's more than enough." Licking his lips, he eyed the food eagerly, then paused uncertainly. "You're sure about this, right?"

Saderia nodded and set the food down on the ground in front of him. "Take it."

Thunder hesitated, then hastily grabbed the food, his dark brown eyes gleaming with guilt. "Thanks." Quickly, he stepped back toward Lightning and Dingo, keeping his eyes locked on the ground as if embarrassed over accepting food from her. Typical dingo pride...

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes at Thunder in bewilderment. "Did you say something about a camp? How many outcasts are there?"

Thunder shrugged evasively. "A lot. Like I said, Rock exiles dingoes for looking at him funny these days. We all kind of banded together

and formed a camp. It's not a normal camp. We move around a lot, but occasionally we pick a place to stay for a few nights."

"Speaking of which, we probably need to get back." Lightning quickly turned around to face Thunder, his yellow eyes narrowing with concern. "We passed out for a long time. The others might be wondering where you are, Thunder. They'll be worried."

Thunder winced and nodded quickly. "You're right. We need to get back. Bunny!" He flicked his tail at the tiny pup and gave her a stern glare when she only continued to stare up at Saderia in amazement. "Come on. We need to get back."

Bunny blinked, then rolled her eyes. "All *right*." Giving him a mutinous glare, she glanced back at Saderia and grinned. "Just so you know, when I was exiled, I survived all on my own before Lightning found me. So I don't need them to look after me."

Saderia managed a weak smile. "Impressive."

Bunny gave her a haughty sneer, then darted clumsily back toward her brother.

Thunder heaved a sigh and rose stiffly to his paws, shaking sand out of his matted yellow brown fur. Glancing up, he managed a sad smile. "I'm glad I got to see you again, Dingo. I'm glad you have a better life now. Especially after all the horrible things we did to you."

Dingo shook his head quickly. "No, it's okay. I don't care about the past." His eyes glimmered with worry. "You just take care of yourself and the others, okay?"

Thunder gave him a weak, grateful smile and nodded without a word. Raising his tail in farewell, he dipped his head to Dingo, then turned around and bounded off into the desert, never once stopping to look back. Behind him, Lightning hastily picked his sister up by the scruff and rapidly hurried after him, nearly tripping over his own paws.

Silently, the four friends watched the outcasts race away until they vanished behind a sand dune. Only then did Saderia see the pain and longing in Dingo's eyes and realize just how much he wanted to help them.

Chapter Fifteen

Another Way

A howl split the cold night air. Thundering paw steps roared in Saderia's ears. A gasp tore out of her throat and her eyes flew open in shock, but before she could see what was happening, the darkness around her was torn apart by the deafening sounds of battle. Screams, snarls, and bloodthirsty howls rang in the air, shrieking against her eardrums and making her heart stop in her chest. In a flash, the darkness around her vanished to reveal a horrifying scene.

Shadows clashed all around her. Heat washed over her and the salty, metallic scent of blood rose in her nose, sending a chill down her spine. Screams rang in her ears. All around her, shadowy figures howled and lunged toward one another, covering the shadowed, sandy ground with a mass of writhing dark figures. Blood splattered the sand. A drop of the sticky red liquid splashed Saderia's face. Her eyes widened in horror, but before she could move, a low snarl erupted behind her. With a gasp, she whipped around just in time to see a shadowy mass of dark figures race toward her.

Her eyes widened in terror. Letting out a cry, she whipped around and raced away as fast as she could, weaving in and out of bloody, battling groups of figures. Glancing back, she felt her heart stop when a blurred, yellow brown figure leapt in between her and her dark pursuers. A dark aura of fear and determination swept out from the figure. "Run!" he shouted. "Get out of here and don't come back! You don't have to die like us!"

Shaking with fear, Saderia whipped around and ran as fast as her paws could carry her, her legs burning with effort. Blood splashed against her paws with every step she took. Behind her, a low growl echoed out over the screams and howls of battle.

"Get them! Don't let them escape! Kill all of them!" A dangerous snicker sounded in the darkness. "Except for the dingo. Leave him to me!"

Suddenly, her friends appeared from the shadows and fell into step with her. Dash raced close beside her, but when she turned to look at him, an ominous darkness shadowed him, hiding him from sight. Only if she glanced at him from out of the corner of her eye could she see him as he should be. Jeb ran on her other side, his eyes wide with terror. Dingo led the way, his shaggy brown tail streaming out behind him and his light brown eyes blazing with determination. Without warning, the canine skidded to an abrupt halt and gritted his teeth. Before she could stop him, he whirled around and raced back toward the bloody battle, letting out a loud snarl. A scream tore out of her throat, but he didn't stop.

"I don't care if I die. I'll die doing what I always dreamed of..." Words floated to her ears as she watched her canine friend race toward the bloody mess. Darkness swept out from the shadowed battlefield and seemed to drag him in. Her vision blurred just before he vanished into the dark fray and the scene flickered. Dingo lunged with a vicious howl, but into a new battle instead of the one she had last seen. New shadowy figures surged into the violent fray. Earsplitting howls echoed through the frigid air, making her heart skip. Everywhere, dark figures clashed, staining the sand red with blood and howling with fury.

In the midst of the bloody battle towered an enormous rock den with a long, craggy platform gazing out over the fight. Her mother's scream pierced the air just as a dark figure wreathed in shadows leapt to the top of the rocky platform. Throwing back his head, the figure let out a booming, triumphant roar. "Long live the true King!"

Saderia's eyes flew open and a gasp tore out of her throat. Letting out a cry of alarm, she leapt to her paws, her legs shaking and her heart racing wildly with fear. The agonized screams and howls from her nightmare still echoed in her ears, sending shivers of horror and dismay racing down her spine. Shakily, she gazed around at her surroundings and took a deep, quavering breath. All around her was nothing but dark, barren desert sand lit up by silver moonlight. No screaming figures were in sight.

"Saderia?" Her head snapped up at the fearful voice. Jeb stood beside her, looking up at her in alarm and shivering in the shadows of night. "What's going on? I heard you scream. Are you okay?"

Saderia blinked, then took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to relax. “Yeah, I...I’m fine. I just had a nightmare. Sorry if I woke you... Just go back to sleep.”

Jeb hesitated uncertainly, then managed a nervous nod. “All right... If you say so.” He studied her a moment longer, then slowly laid back down, hiding a shiver of fear.

Heaving a sigh, Saderia glanced at the spot where Dash had fallen asleep beside her and blinked in surprise when she realized the dark lion was still deeply asleep even after her scream. Shaking her head in bewilderment, she turned away from his deathly still form and looked around for Dingo. A twinge of panic clouded her eyes when she didn’t see him immediately. Seconds later, her gaze flicked to a nearby sand dune. Dingo sat at the top of the sandy hill, staring down at her with worried light brown eyes. When she offered him a weak, reassuring smile, he merely nodded and turned back to gaze out at the desert.

A frown spread across Saderia’s face. Couldn’t Dingo sleep? Casting a quick glance at Dash and Jeb’s sleeping forms, she slowly padded toward the dune, ignoring the shakiness of her legs. So focused on Dingo, she didn’t notice that Dash never once moved in his sleep.

“Today was...weird.” Dash’s voice echoed softly around the cold, eerily lit dream clearing. “We met up with these outcasts...and I felt so bad for them. They were really underfed and weak. Saderia gave them food, but I felt like we should have done more. It’s not right to let animals live in conditions as horrible as theirs.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Dastarius’s calm voice made Dash look up sharply. As usual, his father sat in front of him on the frigid grass, his tail curled neatly around his paws. The spirit’s amber eyes darkened. “But I wouldn’t suggest you get too attached to them.”

Dash winced and quickly looked away, his eyes grim and shadowed with pain. “You’re right. They...probably won’t last too long, will they?”

“No.” Dastarius watched his son with grave, shadowed amber eyes, then gave him a light flick of his tail. “However, if you run into them again, it wouldn’t hurt to talk to them. Perhaps you could ask them to look out for the Queen in return for food.”

Dash blinked in surprise, then curled his lip in disgust. "You mean... bribe them with food? That's sick."

"No, it's compromising." Dastarius calmly met Dash's fiery gaze. "Listen, Karenisha could be anywhere..."

"You *know* where she is." Dash glared at him. "So where exactly is this going?"

Dastarius sighed and reluctantly dropped his pretenses, though a wry smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You're getting better at what I taught you. But fine, I'll tell you where this is going." He coolly flicked his tail. "Those outcasts could be of good use to you in the future, so you need to make them like you. The best way to do that is to...give them food, talk to them, find out what's been going on in their lives, pretend like you care..."

"I *do* care," Dash interrupted, his eyes narrowing and a growl rising in his throat.

"Good. Then you won't have to put in the effort of putting on an act." A wry grin crossed Dastarius's face. "Like I said, though, don't get too close to them." His gaze hardened. "Most of them are about two steps away from death and getting closer each second."

Dash shuddered and gritted his teeth, keeping his tone light to hide the pain in his eyes. "If they're in such bad condition, how exactly are they going to...be of use to me?"

Dastarius coolly flicked his tail. "You'll find out soon enough, son. It's merely a theory. To make that theory work, though, you'll need to listen to me." When Dash gave him a mutinous glare but pricked his ears, Dastarius sneered. "You need to make those mutts think you and your friends are their only hope for salvation. That way, when worse comes to worst, they will turn to you for help, and in return, provide you with *their* help."

Dash frowned in confusion. "What kind of help could they give us?"

"You'll find out. Once you earn their trust, that is." Seeing Dash's skeptical gaze, Dastarius gave him a calm smile. "Trust me. I'm certain this will pay off in the long run. Besides, it's not as if you have much of a choice anyway."

Dash's fur bristled in indignation. "Why? Are you going to force me to do it?"

Dastarius sneered and flicked his tail. "No. But Princess will. And that Dingo mutt will instantly go along with her, and that Jeb creature will side with them. So you'll lose to popular vote." A sneer twitched at the corners of his mouth when Dash flattened his ears. "You know Princess will want to help those outcasts if she runs into them again. Which she will. Since that Dingo friend of yours is guiding you, he'll be sure to point them out if he happens to find them since he so badly wants them to like him. No matter what, you're going to run into them again. I'm just telling you ahead of time not to grow too attached to them because one way or another, there will be casualties by the time this is over."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "So you've got this all figured out, huh?"

A sneer crossed Dastarius's face. "Like I said, I have a theory."

Dash narrowed his eyes and studied him closely. Neither lion said a word for ages. Dastarius's amber eyes bored into Dash's, but Dash refused to look away. That would be the cowardly thing to do. Heaving a long sigh, Dash flattened his ears and regarded his father coolly. "All right. Is that what this meeting was for? So you could tell me that?"

"Not quite." A faint smirk crossed his face. "I just wanted to get that out of the way first, so we could have time for other things."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Well...You don't seem to need any more lessons in gaining confidence, which I see is rapidly turning into arrogance." When Dash rolled his eyes, a grin twitched at the corners of Dastarius's mouth. "Why don't we practice something else? Something that is always useful."

Dash narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Again...such as?"

Dastarius chuckled and carefully rose to his paws. "Fighting."

Dash's eyes widened in shock and he hastily took a step back in alarm. "What?"

"Fighting," Dastarius repeated, his voice calm and unbothered.

Dash's fur bristled in unease. "I already know how to fight. And besides, how am I supposed to fight with a ghost?"

"You might know a bit about fighting, but your skills could use improvement." A mischievous gleam lit up Dastarius's amber eyes. "As for fighting me, you'll find that I'm a bit more solid in the world of these meetings than in the living world."

Dash nervously backed away. "I thought you said the dead couldn't hurt the living."

Dastarius calmly flicked his tail. "We can't. Not in your world anyway."

Dash's eyes widened in alarm and he frantically took several quick steps away.

Dastarius rolled his eyes. "Oh, relax. I can't actually hurt you, son, and I wouldn't anyway. I'm merely going to teach you a few things."

"I don't know about this," he hedged, backing up and uneasily flattening his ears.

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "Why? Don't you trust me?"

Dash shrank back uncomfortably. "Er...sort of?"

Dastarius chuckled softly. "Ah, I see. You only trust me when it's convenient for you."

Alarm shone in Dash's eyes and he quickly shook his head. "No, I didn't say that!"

Dastarius merely held up a paw, waving his worries away. "Never mind that, son. If you don't trust me, that's just as well. After all, if you're going to fight a real opponent, you won't be able to trust them either. A healthy wariness of me will help you improve."

Dash flattened his ears in annoyance. "I really hate it when you have a point."

Dastarius snickered softly. "Are you ready to start training?"

Dash narrowed his eyes and inched closer to the woods. "Uh...not really."

A sneer crossed Dastarius's face. "Then you're going to trust me even less for this." Without warning, he bunched his muscles and lunged at Dash.

A cry of alarm tore out of Dash's throat. Before he could move, Dastarius slammed into him and threw him to the ground, pressing his paws roughly against his shoulders. Hissing furiously, Dash lashed out wildly with his claws, trying to shove him off. His claws struck something, but before he could try to push Dastarius away, the dark lion leapt away from him and let him up, facing him with calm, serious amber eyes.

"Wrong," he growled, his tone calm and businesslike. "You panicked and didn't think. You had a chance to claw my stomach, but

because you panicked, you didn't see that and instead just struck out at random. I could have killed you just now."

Gaping in disbelief, Dash staggered clumsily to his paws. "Sorry! I wasn't ready!"

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "If I were an enemy trying to rip your throat out, do you really think I'd care whether or not you were ready?"

Dash hissed and glared at his father. "What exactly is the point of this?"

"The point is to make you a better fighter, so that you don't die when you face some of the strongest enemies you've ever had to face." Dastarius regarded him with a cool, mild stare and flicked his tail. "Try to think quickly this time."

Before Dash could protest, Dastarius jumped at him again, slamming his paws against his shoulders and shoving him down onto the cold ground. With a sharp hiss, Dash fiercely kicked up at his stomach, making his father leap away in one smooth movement.

"Better." Dastarius landed neatly on his paws and faced Dash calmly, shaking out his black mane and sneering faintly. "Although I think you only did that because I told you to."

Hissing, Dash swiped a claw at him, but Dastarius side-stepped the attack easily.

A grin spread across the dark lion's face. "Now you're just being petty."

Fury blazed in Dash's eyes. "I'll show you petty!" Bunching his muscles, he lunged toward his father, but to his dismay, Dastarius leapt away from him just seconds before he reached him. Before he could stop himself, Dash soared right past him and slammed onto the icy ground, hissing furiously. Rolling across the grass, he staggered weakly to his paw and groaned, putting a paw to his forehead and wincing in pain. Annoyance gleamed in his amber eyes. Fighting in a dream shouldn't be this painful...

Dastarius smoothly turned around to face him, his expression calm but lit up with the faintest hint of amusement. "This is why you need more practice."

Dash narrowed his eyes and sent silent waves of hatred in his direction. If he got one good swipe at him, he would aim for his mouth so he wouldn't have to hear his annoying, sneering voice...

As if reading his thoughts, Dastarius raised an eyebrow and sneered. “You need to be able to think quickly and clearly. In the near future, you’ll run into some unpleasant surprises that you need to be prepared for. You don’t get second chances in the real world. You need to learn new skills so you will be ready to fight when the time comes.”

Dash lashed his tail in fury. “I don’t need your advice!” Letting out a snarl, he lunged toward Dastarius again. His claws met with his father’s shoulders, but before he could push him to the ground, the dark lion twisted and sent him flying away. Twisting frantically in midair, Dash clumsily caught himself and whirled around to face Dastarius. Dash’s claws swiped at his face, but Dastarius ducked just before he hit him, then slammed into Dash’s raised paw before he could regain his balance, sending him stumbling to the ground.

Grumbling fiercely, Dash struggled to pull himself to his paws. Before he could find his balance, Dastarius slammed into his side and rolled him onto his back to pin him to the ground. Hissing with fury, Dash slapped him across the face and hastily rolled away while Dastarius was stunned. A grin crossed his face and he instantly leapt to his paws, hoping to get in a good hit. The second he turned around, though, his eyes widened in alarm.

A dark brown paw shot toward him. Before he could react, Dastarius slammed a powerful paw into his chest, sending him stumbling backward. Desperately, Dash tried to catch himself, but Dastarius knocked his front paws out from underneath him. The dark lion grabbed him by the scruff of his neck the instant he started to fall and threw him backward, slamming him up against the rough bark of a nearby tree. Before Dash could fight back, his father slammed a heavy paw against his neck, pinning him against the tree.

Hissing furiously, Dash clawed at his paw, but Dastarius refused to let go, keeping him pressed against the rough bark, dangling inches off the ground. His father raised an eyebrow as Dash struggled helplessly to get free. After spitting and clawing as much as he could, Dash finally slumped back against the tree, panting and glaring at Dastarius with as much fire as he could muster. “All right,” he choked out. “I’ll take your advice.”

A sneer crossed Dastarius’s face. “Good.”

Dash rolled his eyes. “Could you let me go now? This tree isn’t exactly soft.”

Dastarius just snickered and lightly pulled his paw away, letting Dash fall unceremoniously to the ground. A glimmer of amusement lit up his amber eyes when Dash hastily picked himself up, hissing under his breath. Gritting his teeth, Dash quickly dusted himself off and glared up at Dastarius, trying to hide his humiliation.

Dastarius sneered. "You want to wipe this smirk off my face, don't you?"

Dash shot him a dry glare. "Gee, how'd you guess?"

Dastarius chuckled knowingly. "The sooner you let me teach you without being so stubborn about it, the sooner you'll be able to do just that."

Dash narrowed his eyes and let out a growl. "Fine. Start teaching."

"Dingo?" Saderia crept closer to her canine friend and sat down at the top of the shadowed, moonlit sand dune, eying him curiously. "What's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

Dingo glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and shrugged. "I suppose I could if I really wanted to. I just thought I would stay up for a while."

"All right..." A frown crossed her face and she watched him closely, her eyes bright with curiosity. "Why, though? Is there something on your mind?"

Dingo lightly flicked his tail. "Just the usual stuff."

"No..." Saderia's eyes glowed knowingly. "This is about those outcasts, isn't it?"

Dingo's eyes flicked to her face and a faint grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

Saderia weakly returned the smile. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. I just want to make sure you're all right. I mean, those dingoes we saw were your old friends, so..."

"They were never my friends," Dingo muttered. "I didn't have friends."

"Sorry." Saderia's gaze softened. "Still, they're your old pack mates."

Dingo just shrugged and looked up at the silent, twinkling stars. "It was kind of a shock to see them, especially in the condition they were in, but I'm okay."

Saderia raised an eyebrow and gave him a cool, knowing look.

Seeing her gaze, he rolled his eyes. "Okay, fine. I know I'm not fooling anyone."

She looked down guilty. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Dingo shot her a knowing look of his own. "No, because then it will bother you."

Her face grew hot with embarrassment. "Well...maybe. But I can deal with it."

Dingo chuckled and shook his head. "You're a character." Heaving a sigh, he gazed dully at the stars. "It's nothing major. Like I said, I was mainly just surprised to see them. But...well, Thunder had it made. He was Second in Command. And yet he realized that what he was doing was wrong. He ignored the perks of having power and put his own life at risk to speak out against Rock." He shook his head in amazement. "I never thought anyone would do something like that, much less a Second in Command. Plus, it's just amazing that they actually believe *I* was right about something." His eyes fluttered shut and he took a deep breath. "They actually believe me about what Bone did to Claw."

Saderia pressed her tail gently against his shoulder. "Aren't you happy about that?"

Dingo nodded weakly. "Yeah, I am. Actually, all of it just seems surreal. I never thought any of my old pack mates would believe me or think of me as anything other than 'that freaky different dingo.' I mean... when I lived in the pack, sometimes I wondered if *I* was crazy and the others were right. Sometimes I still do. I mean, you guys don't think I'm crazy, but all the dingoes did. Sometimes I wondered if I was wrong to want to change them...But now someone actually thinks the way I do. Thunder even apologized for how they treated me. They might even *like* me now that they know I wasn't insane!"

Dingo let out a shaky breath, his eyes misty. "I never thought any of my own kind would *ever* like me. But now...I'm not so alone anymore. Other dingoes know how it feels to be hated and looked down on! Others know how it feels to be *me*!" He squeezed his eyes shut. "And I hate it so much. I don't want them to know what it feels like to be me. I wish Thunder and Lightning were the same apathetic followers they used to be. At least

that way, they wouldn't be out there, starving, wondering how to survive, debating whether to even bother *trying* to survive..." Dingo shook his head and sighed. "I spent my whole life wishing *someone* would understand me and know how horrible it is to be me...and now that it's finally happened, I'd give anything for it not to have happened."

Saderia let out a soft, heavy sigh. "I'm sorry, Dingo. But that's what makes you such a great animal. I know you feel bad for your old friends. I do too. But I can't think of any way we could help them. And trust me, I've been thinking about it ever since we left them."

"I know," Dingo murmured, his voice soft and distant. "Thank you. After what the dingoes did to you, it's amazing that you would want to help them at all."

"They did much worse to you. You still care about them." When Dingo merely sighed, Saderia offered him a weak smile. "Tell you what... I'll talk to your sister as soon as I get a chance and I'll ask her if there's anything we can do to help them. And if we see any more outcasts on our journey, we'll be sure to give them some of our food."

Dingo shot her a grateful smile. "Thanks, Saderia. You're always so helpful." He heaved a sigh and gazed out at the desert. "I just wish you could help everyone."

Saderia winced and let out a soft breath. "Me too."

Dingo nodded vaguely, then gave her a curious glance. "Speaking of which, what was that scream about? I thought you had been attacked. Did you have a Dream?"

"I did." Visions swirled through Saderia's mind, but she tried to hide a shiver as she glanced curiously up at Dingo. "Since you don't want to sleep, do you want to hear about it?"

Dingo shrugged. "Sure."

"Okay." She paused, then gave him a stern glare. "You really should get some sleep, though."

A grin tugged at the corners of Dingo's mouth. "I should do a lot of things, Saderia. Sleeping isn't particularly high up on my list right now."

She grinned and rolled her eyes. "Brace yourself then. This Dream was *weird*."

Dawn light filtered in through the cracked window in Makero's room, stinging his eyes with its depressing shine. Six days. It had been six days since Saderia had left. Taking a deep breath, he rigidly sat up on his bed and rubbed his eyes, his vision hazy and dull. Last night, he hadn't slept at all. Groaning, he stretched his legs and felt his eyelids droop with exhaustion. Deep down, he knew he should have slept. Worrying about Saderia was pointless. All it did was hurt him and impede his progress on repairing the forest.

"Makero?" The soft voice made his eyes flutter open in surprise. Blinking rapidly, the King looked up to see Cia standing in the doorway, her blue eyes dark with worry.

Cia bit her lip uncomfortably. "Sorry. I was just wondering if you were awake."

Makero shrugged wearily. "I am, as you can see." He paused, then studied her closely, a small glimmer of hope creeping into his dull green eyes. "Cia...you haven't had any Dreams or senses about Saderia or Karenisha, have you?"

Cia frowned in concern. "No, Makero...I don't have the royal family's Dream sense. It's only given to one child per generation and that was my sister. You know that."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry." He heaved a sigh, trying to hide his disappointment. "I just thought you might have a few extra senses...just enough to sense something about Saderia or Karenisha. Dreams do run in your family, after all." He let out a soft breath and closed his eyes. "Oh well. I know they're all right, anyway. They can take care of themselves."

Cia opened her mouth to speak, then broke off and just gave him a weak smile, humoring him. "Okay, Makero." Uncomfortably, she glanced back at the hallway, as if searching for an escape, then turned anxiously back to the King. "Anyway, I just came to tell you that breakfast is ready. Anytime you want to come out to eat is fine." Giving him one last, lingering glance, she slowly backed out and shut the door silently behind her.

Makero just rolled his eyes. Saderia and Karenisha had better come home soon. If for nothing else, then to get Cia and Jash to stop treating him like a mental case...

“That’s a pretty creepy Dream.” Despite the boiling heat of the desert, Dash shivered as he padded across the hazy sand. Just moments ago, Saderia had described her eerie Dream. The tiger Princess walked a few paces ahead of him, leading the way with Dingo while her other friends trailed behind her, hanging on her every word.

A mystified gleam lit up Jeb’s bicolor eyes. “What do you think it means?”

Saderia shrugged, her eyes bewildered. “I’ve been thinking about it for a while, but the only thing I get out of it is that there’s going to be an awful lot of fighting in the future. It has something to do with the dingoes, too, so keep your eyes open. We’ve been out here for six days and so far, we haven’t seen any dingoes except for the three outcasts. I don’t know about you guys, but I find that kind of odd. I think we might be seeing a lot more of them in the days to come. And most of them probably won’t be friendly.”

A frown crossed Dash’s face. “You know, now that I think about it, it is odd that we haven’t seen any pack members. Usually, they find us and attack.”

Jeb shivered and shrank back in fear. “You think they’re planning something?”

Dingo snorted. “I don’t know what Rock could possibly be planning, but I certainly wouldn’t put it past him. Power’s gone to his head faster than I could blink.”

“Dingo’s right,” Saderia murmured, her eyes darkening. “I have no idea what the dingoes could possibly want with us, but something’s going on with them. Something that affects us. Why else would Rock’s creepy den haunt every one of my Dreams?”

Dash frowned uneasily. “You’re right. But what could possibly be going on?”

“I don’t know.” Saderia’s eyes narrowed with unease. “But we have to find out.” She paused, then shared a long, knowing look with Dingo, her amber eyes glowing with determination. “And to do that, we’ve got to find those outcasts again.”

Dash’s eyebrows leapt up in a look of surprise that seemed somehow forced. “Really?” He paused, then frowned. “How are we going to do that?”

Saderia's eyes glowed. "We'll use my Dream sense. Dingo and I talked last night and we decided that I should temporarily stop looking for my Mom in order to focus on what's going on with the dingoes. My Mom must be *somewhere* in this desert and I want to sort out whatever problems we might have with the dingoes first because they might pose a threat to her. I also have this...feeling that somehow they'll be important in helping us find her. So now that I've decided on a specific course of action—finding outcasts—I'm almost certain my Dream sense will show me only one direction instead of two."

Dash's eyes lit up with understanding. "Oh, yeah. That's like what you did the last time you and I were lost in the desert, back when we were looking for Dingo."

"Exactly." A smile lit up her face, then faltered. "Although...I'm a little worried about finding the outcasts. Whenever I Dream about dingoes, there's always violence."

Dingo snorted. "That's not exactly shocking news."

"Well...true..." Saderia hesitated, then glanced around at her friends, her eyes shadowed with unease. "Still, it seems like we might be headed toward danger. We might have to fight our way out of a few sticky situations...Can you guys handle that?"

Dash held his head up high and nodded. "Of course. I'll always fight for you."

Jeb shivered, but tried to raise his head and look as brave as Dash. "I'll help however I can," he murmured, seeming surprised by the steadiness of his own voice.

Dingo calmly met Saderia's gaze, his expression stony and determined. "It's what I signed up for. I'll do whatever needs to be done. I'll fight for you till the bitter end."

A warm smile crossed Saderia's face. "And I'll do the same for all of you." When her friends smiled back at her, she took a deep breath and paused, gazing out at the horizon with shining amber eyes. "Well, I guess it's time I figured out which way we should go."

Slowly, her three friends sat back on the hot sand around her, waiting patiently. Smiling a weak smile, Saderia closed her eyes, letting the world disappear around her until the only thing she was aware of were her thoughts. Focusing only on finding the outcasts, she scanned the desert in

her mind, searching for any sign of the skinny dingoes. Her instinct took hold at once and a small, intuitional tug pulled her in one specific direction. Just one.

A small smile crossed her face. Blinking open her eyes, she took a deep breath as her instinct faded away and her sandy surroundings crept back into focus. Slowly, the questioning faces of her friends swam back into view, making a grin light up her face. “That way,” she announced, pointing with her paw in the direction she had sensed.

Dingo nodded and rose to his paws to lead the way, his light brown eyes twinkling with a calm sense of excitement. Behind him, Dash and Jeb hastily stumbled to their paws and followed after him, while Saderia crept up to lead alongside him. A determined glint lit up her amber eyes as she walked across the sand, telling herself she was doing the right thing. If she took this path, she might just be able to help everyone. Focusing on the path, she pushed away any doubts. If she started to doubt herself, the path would become less clear. The last thing she needed was to end up lost without knowing what to do.

Beside her, Dash didn’t need to tell himself a thing. Even if it surprised him to find Dastarius had been right, he had known all along this would happen. All he had to do now was wait for them to find the outcasts so he could play his part and get them to trust him—just like how he was starting to trust Dastarius. After all, he had been right all along.

Several hours dragged by under the withering hot sun. After traveling for what felt like years, Saderia’s entire body felt weak with exhaustion. Tiredly, she stumbled across the sand with her exhausted friends struggling to keep up all around her. The only one who didn’t seem tired was Dingo, who led the way and remained on high alert with every step. Saderia envied his energy. After so much traveling, she had lost hope that they would find anything. Her eyelids drooped, making her stumble across the sand. Heaving a sigh, she forced open her eyes and gazed dazedly around at the desert, then froze.

“Get down!” she hissed, gesturing frantically with her tail. Instantly, her friends looked up in alarm and dropped down to the ground, seeing the fearful gleam in her eyes.

Dash crouched down beside her and hissed. "What is it? Dingoes? Outcasts?"

A frown spread across Saderia's face. "I'm not sure." Narrowing her eyes, she squinted to get a better look. A few feet away, several shadowed figures padded across the desert floor. With the blinding light of the sun burning on the horizon and the waves of heat rising up from the sand, the figures seemed hazy, like ripples in a pond. Still, the sand seemed covered with enough canine figures to make up a whole camp...Some lay on the ground, some stood. A few seemed to be speaking to one another. From where she was crouched, Saderia couldn't tell whether they were pack members or outcasts.

An uneasy shiver raced through her. "Dingo? Are we near the pack's camps?"

Dingo shook his head slowly. "No. The pack's camps are far away from here."

A glimmer of hope glowed in Saderia's chest and her heart sped up. "Then I have a good feeling about this." Casting a quick glance around at her friends, she flicked her tail to signal for them to stay put. "Stay here. I'm going to take a closer look."

Dingo narrowed his eyes and held up a paw to stop her. "Maybe I should do that."

Saderia shook her head sternly. "No, I need to do this. I'll only go far enough to see if they look like outcasts. If they do, I'll come get you guys so we can approach them. Maybe I can even find Thunder in the crowd. He might be friendly to us again."

Dingo hesitated uncertainly, then gave a reluctant nod. "All right. But be careful."

"I will." Giving her friends one last glance, Saderia turned and crouched down low to the ground. Silently, she slunk across the sand, her belly brushing the gritty grains. Without a sound, she crept up the slope of a small dune and crouched near the top to peer out at the canines. Closer to the myriad of dingoes, she was able to see them more clearly. Many of the dingoes before her seemed to be in a condition as bad as the one Thunder and Lightning had been in. Ribs poked out from their gaunt sides and their fur seemed filthy. Sure signs of outcasts.

Heaving a long sigh of relief, Saderia glanced over her shoulder and started to signal to her friends, then froze. Without warning, a howl erupted behind her, making her whirl around in shock to see an outcast staring right at her.

Shock and horror shone on the outcast's face. "Someone's over there!"

In a flash, every dingo in the makeshift camp whipped around in surprise, then let out gasps of shock when they saw her. Howls of alarm split the air. Yelling in panic, dingoes raced in all directions, covering the sand with a wild, terrified mass of fleeing canines. Nearly all the dingoes raced away from her as fast as they could move, but two dingoes bared their fangs and charged toward her.

Alarm shone in Saderia's eyes. With a soft gasp, she leapt to her paws and staggered back, preparing to run. Paw steps thundered behind her, but before she could look back, Dash and Dingo leapt up to stand on either side of her, letting out furious growls while Jeb cowered close behind them.

A low growl rumbled in Dingo's throat. "Back off!"

"Lay one paw on her and I'll rip you to shreds," Dash echoed, bristling in fury.

The outcasts skidded to an abrupt halt, their eyes wide with equal amounts of fear and fury. Bristling, they bared their fangs and glared, lashing their tails distressfully back and forth. Dash and Dingo glared back, gritting their teeth and digging their claws into the ground. Dismay gleamed in Saderia's eyes and horror swept over her. This was not the way she had wanted to meet the outcasts. Her eyes darted wildly back and forth between her side and theirs, waiting for someone to make a move. Seeing the glares of the outcasts and hearing the low growls of her friends, peace suddenly seemed too much to ask for.

Chapter Sixteen

A New Plan

Nobody moved. No one spoke or said a word. Several tense minutes dragged by like hours as each side waited for the other to make a move. The outcasts glared at them, their eyes narrowed with suspicion. Not once did they take their eyes off them. Dash and Dingo glared back, their stances tense in preparation for a fight. Saderia stood tensely among her friends, her eyes nervous. Any minute now, she expected a fight to break out.

After what felt like hours, one of the outcasts let out a low growl. “Who are you?”

Dingo narrowed his eyes warily and hesitated, then cautiously took a step toward them and met their frightened eyes. “It’s me...Dingo. Don’t you recognize me?”

The outcasts’ eyes widened in alarm and they staggered back in shock. One of the shaggy brown outcasts gaped in disbelief, his blue eyes widening in fear. “It...it really is him.”

The dark brown outcast beside him staggered back several paces, his expression twisted with disbelief despite the recognition in his brown eyes. “No...It...It’s impossible!”

“Listen.” Dingo took a deep breath and faced them as calmly as possible. “I’m not dead. I survived. And I won’t hurt you unless you try to hurt us first. Could one of you please tell all the others to calm down?” he added, glancing guiltily at the fleeing outcasts as they gathered together in one big group far away from them, eyeing them fearfully.

The light brown outcast narrowed his eyes uncertainly. “How do we know you won’t hurt us?”

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “Because I’m *me*. You know me. I don’t hurt others.”

“Yeah, that’s what we thought.” The dark brown outcast narrowed his eyes and took a nervous step back, his gaze wary. “But you proved us wrong six months ago.”

“Hey, shut it, would you?!” The light brown outcast’s eyes blazed with alarm and he whipped around to glare at his companion. “Thunder told us what really happened!”

“Yeah, but still...” The dark brown outcast gave Dingo a fearful glance and flattened his ears, dropping his voice to a whisper. “Even if it was justified, he’s still dangerous.”

Other dingoes thought of him as *dangerous*? A twinge of satisfaction trickled into Dingo’s mind, but he quickly shook the feeling away and met the outcasts’ eyes as calmly as he could. “The only reason I killed Bone is because he killed my sister,” he murmured, causing them both to jump. “I won’t do anything to you unless you hurt me or one of my friends first.”

Both outcasts eyed him warily, then exchanged a long, nervous glance. After a long, tense moment, the two slowly forced themselves to relax, making their fur lie flat. One of them eyed him uneasily. “If you’re not here to attack, then what *are* you doing here?”

Dingo slowly sat back, keeping his expression calm and unthreatening. “I’m just here to help. I heard about Rock and wanted to see if there was anything I could do.”

“Why?” The dark brown outcast frowned, his eyes narrowing in incredulity. “After what we did to you, why would you want anything to do with us?”

Dingo’s eyes darkened with seriousness. “I used to be an outcast, remember? I know what it’s like. Besides, I barely even remember any of that stuff from the past.”

The outcasts exchanged uneasy glances, then slowly turned back to Dingo, their expressions slightly calmer. “Okay,” the light brown one murmured, his eyes uncertain. “I doubt there’s anything you can do, but if you just want to see the camp, that’s fine.”

Saderia took a step forward, her eyes gleaming with hope. “That’s all we want to do. We just want to see what’s been going on.”

The outcasts narrowed their eyes and cast a wary glance at her. One of them lowered his voice to a nervous whisper. “That’s one of Dingo’s forest food.”

The dark brown outcast flattened his ears and glared at him. “I’m aware of that. Don’t call them that either. You know Dingo doesn’t like us

calling them that!”

The light brown outcast’s eyes widened in alarm. “S-Sorry!”

Narrowing his eyes nervously, the dark brown dog turned back to Dingo. “You’ll have to talk to Thunder if you want to see the camp. He makes the decisions around here.”

Dingo blinked in surprise, but simply nodded. “All right. Is he here?”

“I’ll go get him.” The light brown outcast hastily whirled around and darted toward the enormous crowd of outcasts standing anxiously behind them, watching them with eyes full of fear.

The dark brown outcast frowned and glanced uncertainly back at Dingo. “You’re not...on Rock’s side or anything, are you? And he’s not following you either, right?”

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “Why would I ever be on Rock’s side? And no, last time I checked, he wasn’t stalking us, though I’m sure it’s one of his favorite hobbies.”

He nodded shakily. “Okay...I guess you wouldn’t be on his side. After all, Rock was friends with Bone, and you made it pretty clear how you feel about Bone...” His eyes widened in alarm and he looked up rapidly. “Not that I’m blaming you! I’m sorry!”

Dingo blinked in shock, almost unable to believe what was happening. His old pack mates, who had mocked him, laughed at him, and smacked him around...were now afraid of him. For a second, he felt like pinching himself to see if it was real. By far, this was the strangest thing that had ever happened to him...and he hung around with forest animals who spoke to ghosts in their sleep. His ears flattened uncomfortably at the thought of making his old pack mates afraid, but deep down, he felt a tiny sense of power. Forcefully shaking the feeling away, he sat back patiently and looked up when he spotted the light brown outcast racing back toward him. A yellow brown canine bounded alongside him.

Thunder’s eyes widened in surprise when he saw who stood on the edge of his camp. Skidding to a halt, he gaped in shock. “Dingo? What... what are you doing here?”

Dingo shrugged. “I guess I just stumbled onto your camp. I’m sorry for scaring everybody, but Saderia wanted to know what’s been going on

here,” he replied, gesturing to her with his tail. “We were wondering if we could check out your camp.”

Thunder blinked in surprise, then shrugged and nodded. “All right, that’s fine, if you really want to. It’s the least I can do to repay you for the food you gave us the other day. Just wait a moment while I go tell the others that you’re not dangerous and that you’re being welcomed into the camp. They might be a little jumpy right now.”

Dingo nodded and patiently sat back on the sand. “All right. I understand.”

Thunder dipped his head and started to turn, then paused and glanced uneasily at Saderia, Dash, and Jeb. Worry shone in his dark brown eyes. “Are you sure they’re safe? I mean...the forest animals look strange enough as it is. The...other one is even weirder.”

Dingo smiled and nodded firmly. “They’re all safe, Thunder. Saderia and Dash, the tiger and the lion, are from the forest on the left. Jeb is from the forest on the right.”

Thunder eyed him warily. “The weird one?”

“Yes, the weird one.” Dingo lightly flicked his tail and smiled. “It’s not so bad over there. I lived there for a while. And Jeb’s completely safe. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Relief twinkled in Thunder’s eyes. Nodding to Dingo, he briskly turned to pad back toward the crowd of dingoes huddled far away from them. Throwing back his head, he let out a soft howl. Reluctantly, the skinny outcasts crept toward him and gathered around him, their eyes lingering uneasily on Dingo. Leaning closer to the outcasts, Thunder explained what was going on, his words muffled and impossible to make out.

Shock gleamed in the eyes of the outcasts as they listened to Thunder. Silence swept over them as the scrawny canines exchanged bewildered gazes. Eventually, the crowd of dogs started to relax, forcing their fur to lie flat and casting Dingo and his friends a few last, curious glances, hiding their unease. One by one, they tore their eyes off the foreigners and slowly spread out into their camp. The soft, cautious murmur of conversation rose in the air.

With a faint gleam in his eyes, Thunder stepped away from his fellow outcasts and padded back toward Dingo. “They’re okay with it,” he

called. Trying to smile, he gestured to the flat stretch of sand covered with anxious, skinny canines. "Welcome to our camp."

Dingo grinned and humbly dipped his head. "Thanks, Thunder. I appreciate this."

Thunder's eyes widened in surprise at his courtesy, but he smiled. "Don't mention it."

Dingo glanced thoughtfully at the canines milling around camp. "You mind if I talk to some of the dingoes? To get a feel of what's been going on since I left the desert?"

"Feel free." Thunder gave him a faint, apologetic smile. "I would stay to fill you in on what's been happening, but I need to go out hunting. I'll probably be back in a few hours, though, so if you feel like sticking around, I'll be able to talk to you more later."

"Thanks. We might do that." Dingo managed a slight smile. "Good luck hunting."

"I might need it." Giving them a sheepish shrug, Thunder nodded to them, then padded past them. Without another word, he bounded off into the sizzling desert and darted toward a nearby dune, disappearing in a cloud of dust and leaving them behind in the camp.

Turning back around, Dingo faced Saderia and smiled. "You ready?"

An eager smile crossed her face. "Yes. Thanks for handling that so well."

Dingo just shrugged and grinned. Flicking his tail, he signaled for his friends to follow him and padded into the makeshift outcast camp where hundreds of dingoes stood milling around. Several of the skinny outcasts looked up as the four of them crept past them, making Dingo's eyes narrow with unease. To his surprise, though, many of the outcasts offered him weak, wary smiles and waved with bloody paws, offering warm greetings. Blinking in surprise, Dingo hesitated, then returned the greetings as warmly as he could.

Slowly, the four of them crept past hordes of outcasts. Everywhere they turned, the sand was covered with crowds of scrawny, filthy canines. Had they not looked so sickly and weak, they would have been enough to form an entire pack. Each outcast looked up as they passed, some offering weak greetings, but others too exhausted to raise their paw. Filth, grease,

and dried blood covered the outcasts' matted fur and their ribs poked out of their sides. Several of them were covered in gruesome scars. Most of the outcasts sat in groups, talking in hushed voices, while a few lay splayed out on the hot sand, either sunning themselves or sleeping...or worse. All of the outcasts' eyes seemed hollow. Only a few eyes gleamed with some faint, buried hint of hope.

A shiver crept up Saderia's spine. No matter where she turned, she felt like she was staring at crowds of frail skeletons. Trying to hide her horror, she glanced discreetly up at Dingo and blinked in surprise. The canine seemed to see right through the grime and horror of the outcast camp. His eyes seemed to search the crowds for some outcast in particular. A gleam of desperation haunted his shadowed gaze. With a flash of sympathy, Saderia realized he was searching for his brothers, Rip and Tear. Sorrow shone in her eyes. Heaving a sigh, she studied the outcasts for any sign of the red and orange dogs.

By the time they reached the center of camp, neither of them had seen any sign of Dingo's older brothers. Saderia heaved a sigh as she paused on the sandy ground, her heart aching with sympathy. Besides his apathetic mother, Rip and Tear were the only family Dingo had left. The fact that Dingo's brothers were nowhere to be found in the outcast camp probably meant they were still part of Rock's pack. Biting her lip, she rested her tail gently on Dingo's shoulder, not sure whether to feel sorry for him or not. On one hand, if Rip and Tear were still part of Rock's pack, they had to be the same cruel dingoes he remembered. On the other hand, at least they weren't dying as outcasts. Flattening his ears, Dingo shrugged off her tail and calmly sat back to face his friends, hiding the pain in his eyes.

Dash narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "So...now that we're here, what do we do?"

Saderia took a deep breath and slowly gazed around at the outcast camp. No dens had been built into the sand. The camp was simply wide, flat open space surrounded by rolling sand dunes. A miniscule pile of food sat in the middle of the flat land, serving as the center of camp. Ragged outcasts sat all over the camp, talking quietly to one another and casting longing glances at the food pile. Hundreds of them covered the land.

Saderia winced at the sight of the starving, filthy dingoes and took a deep breath. "I guess we should just talk to some of the outcasts and try to

figure out what's been going on. Maybe they'll tell us something that relates to one of my Dreams." Pausing, she frowned and cast a curious glance at Dingo. "Dingo, do you know any of these dingoes well?"

Dingo sighed and glanced darkly at his paws. "Not really. The two I hoped to talk to aren't here." He paused, then slowly looked up and studied the crowds around him, a thoughtful gleam in his eyes. "I didn't hang around with anyone other than my siblings and their friends, so I don't really know anyone here. But...I did kind of know Thunder and his friends, Lightning and Brawny. They used to hang around with my brothers. You guys met Lightning, so you know what he looks like. And Brawny's...well, *brawny*. And dark brown. We might be able to talk to them. Do you see either one of them?"

Saderia frowned and curiously turned around to scan the crowds of ragged dingoes, searching for any sign of Thunder's two friends. With so many outcasts all huddled together, though, it was nearly impossible to pick out any one in particular.

"I can tell you what's been going on." Saderia's eyes widened in surprise at the sound of the haughty, high-pitched voice and she whipped around to see who had spoken. Her mouth gaped open in shock when she spotted a tiny, pitch black pup sitting just a few paces away, watching them with knowing eyes. A mysterious light glowed in her amber irises.

Blinking in surprise, Saderia exchanged a long glance with Dingo, wondering whether or not to bite. After a long hesitation, she gave a slight shrug as if to say 'Why not?' The tiny dingo pup probably couldn't tell them much, but it was worth a try.

Dingo merely nodded, then turned to look down at the small black pup, a curious, appraising look in his eyes. "All right, Bunny. What can you tell us?"

A faint smirk crept across Bunny's face. "What do you want to know?"

Dingo flicked his tail and glanced questioningly at Saderia, waiting for her to speak up. Taking a deep breath, Saderia stepped closer to the tiny dingo pup, watching her with curious amber eyes. The pup stared unflinchingly back at her, never blinking.

Saderia's gaze flicked thoughtfully to her paws and she shrugged. "Well...first of all...how many outcasts are there? Compared to how many

there are in the pack, at least.”

Bunny raised an eyebrow, her eyes glittering with disdain. “Trust me...there are a *lot* more dingoes on Rock’s side. Hundreds of them. There has to be because if there weren’t so many of them, we would have started a war a long time ago and killed Rock!”

The fur on Saderia’s back rose up in shock. Fleetinglly, she remembered Claw telling her that war was the only way to save her mother. Could the dingoes have something to do with saving Karenisha, after all? Or was she reading too much into it? After all, in keeping with the dingo stereotype, nearly all dingoes talked about war and killing. Clearly, this pup held the typical superior attitude of the dingoes, outcast or not.

“Okay...” Saderia frowned, shaking off her unease and trying to think of what else to ask. “When exactly did this outcast camp form? Is anyone in charge of it?”

Bunny’s eyes glimmered with knowledge and haughtiness. “Thunder’s the Leader of the outcasts. The outcast camp formed about four months ago when Rock started exiling *lots* and *lots* of dingoes. It started out with a couple of old friends finding each other after they were exiled and banding together to share food. Then they started finding other outcasts. Eventually, every exiled dingo banded with the group in order to survive.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, not having expected such a specific answer from the young pup. “That’s a very...detailed answer. Were you one of the, er, original outcasts?”

Bunny lightly flicked her tail. “No, I was only exiled two months ago. I just know.”

“Uh, okay...” Saderia paused, then tipped her head to the side in wonder. “What can you tell me about Thunder? How exactly did he become Leader of the outcasts?”

Bunny shrugged. “It just happened. He was exiled a few weeks after Lightning and I were. As an outcast, he met up with his old friends, Brawny and Lightning. They were already part of the outcast pack and they told him about it. Around that time, the camp was falling apart because food was getting scarce and everyone was trying to figure out how to divide it among so many outcasts. Everyone wanted it for themselves. Thunder’s friends told him that, so Thunder went to the camp and attempted to make peace. It didn’t go well. A few dingoes nearly killed him. But he kept trying to unite

us, and eventually we all got desperate enough to listen to him. I guess Thunder's little stint as Rock's Second in Command came in handy. After all, we all knew him as a leader. That's probably why we listened."

Surprised by all the details, Saderia slowly sat back in the sand and curled her tail carefully over her paws. Maybe the tiny pup would be of a lot more use than she had thought. Clearly, she knew a lot about what was going on. Her eyes narrowed curiously. "So do you have any idea what's going on in the pack? I know you've been an outcast for a while, but do you know anything about how things are over in Rock's pack?"

A cool, superior smirk crossed Bunny's face. "Of course." Copying Saderia, she sat back and curled her short black tail neatly over her paws. "Ask me anything."

Saderia frowned and studied her wonderingly. "Well...first of all...if Rock's the Leader of the pack and he exiled Thunder, who's his new Second in Command?"

"He doesn't have one," Bunny replied, lightly flicking her tail. "After he got rid of Thunder, he never chose a new one. He wants all the power for himself." She raised an eyebrow. "A few dingoes got mad about him not picking a Second in Command since it went against the natural way, but if you want to know more about that, you can ask some of the ones who protested yourself." Flicking her ears, she gestured toward a scarred outcast a few feet away. "He's one of the ones who protested. Him, too. Oh, and her..."

Saderia winced and let out a heavy sigh. "He exiled them all?"

Bunny shrugged and nodded. "Yeah. Can't say I didn't see *that* coming."

Saderia took a deep breath, then studied the pup wonderingly. "What else can you tell me about the pack? Rock lives in the old dingo camp, right?"

"Oh, no. He built a new camp." When Saderia looked up in surprise, Bunny simply flicked her tail. "When Rock took over, he moved the entire pack to a new camp and left the two camps we used to have behind. He made the whole pack travel until he found this *huge* den made out of rocks with a platform that looks out over the entire camp. There weren't a lot of other dens, but he gave the few dens that were closest to his own den to his favorites—the ones he hangs out with and trusts to do important stuff.

Everyone else slept in the open. Anyway, his new camp is a lot closer to the forest now. It's only a few hours away from it, actually."

Surprise shone in Saderia's eyes at all the information, but a dark sense of dread hid her shock. Vaguely, she remembered Thunder telling Dingo about Rock's den, but with Bunny's words, she could picture it all too well. Her description matched the creepy rock from her Dreams perfectly...Unease colored her eyes. So it really was Rock's den...

A shadow crossed her face. "Bunny, do you know if Rock is planning anything?"

Bunny's eyes lit up with excitement. "Cool, we finally get to the good part!" Leaning closer, she dropped her voice to a cool whisper. "Yes, Rock's planning something *big*. I'm not sure what, but I eavesdropped on him once and heard some interesting things."

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise. "You eavesdropped on Rock?"

A proud gleam shone in Bunny's eyes and she nodded eagerly. "Yeah. A few days before I was exiled. But that doesn't matter. What matters is what I heard him say." She hesitated, then sneered. "I spied on him talking to his favorites, and I heard him say something about the guards he posted along the forest borders. I know his guards are there to stop us outcasts from going to the forests to get food, but evidently, he has another reason for posting them there." Her eyes glimmered knowingly. "He's looking for forest food."

"Probably us," Saderia murmured, hiding a shiver of unease. "And Dingo."

Bunny shrugged. "Maybe. But I don't think he meant *just* you. The way he was talking, it seemed like he was expecting all kinds of forest food to come crawling out of the forest. He called them search parties."

Saderia blinked in surprise and stared at the pup in shock. A wave of cold disquiet swept over her, raising the fur along her back and making her eyes narrow with unease. "Why would he call them that?"

The pup flicked her tail apathetically. "I assume it has something to do with the prisoner, but I'm not sure. Anyway, he was talking to some of the guards he posted along the borders and he specifically told them that if any forest food came out of the forest, they shouldn't kill them. Instead, he told them to bring them to him. He said he wanted 'a word with them.' Whatever that means." She raised an eyebrow. "Isn't that weird, though?"

Rock usually wants to kill stuff, not have words with it. Especially if it's food."

Saderia blinked several times, barely hearing her. Her heart skipped and a wave of cold washed over her, sending an icy shiver down her spine. "Bunny..." She hesitated and studied the small pup nervously. "What can you tell me about...Rock's prisoner?"

Bunny blinked in surprise, then broke out in a wide grin. "Oh yeah! I almost forgot about that! I thought *everyone* knew about that!" The small pup opened her mouth to explain, then broke off abruptly and pricked her ears in surprise when a sudden commotion erupted a few feet away.

An echoing howl rose up from the front of camp, making everyone look up in surprise. Hope glowed in the eyes of the outcasts around Saderia and each of them raced toward the front of the camp, raising their voices in a loud, indistinct murmur of excitement. In a flash of yellow fur, Lightning raced through the crowds of eager outcasts and skidded to a halt in front of them. "Bunny," he exclaimed, his voice bright with excitement. "A hunting party has just returned! They're dividing up the food now!"

Bunny's eyes lit up with excitement. "Yay, food! Let's go!"

Lightning grinned and started to turn, then froze when he saw the dark shadow on Saderia's face. A frown crossed his face. "Er...sorry. Did I interrupt something?"

Saderia's heart sank with disappointment, but she shook her head and managed a weak smile, knowing she couldn't deprive the pup of much-needed nutrition. "No, everything's fine. You and Bunny should go eat. We'll go mingle somewhere else."

Lightning gave her a warm smile and nodded. "All right. Good luck," he called, turning around to race back toward the front of camp with Bunny close beside him. Soon, the brother and sister disappeared into the crowd of hopeful outcasts swarming the front of camp.

Dash stared grimly after them, his eyes shadowed. "Well...that was interesting."

Saderia's eyes darkened. "We need to learn more about Rock and his 'prisoner.'"

Dingo flicked his tail coolly, his eyes dark and grave. "Our best bet would probably be to talk to Thunder."

“You’re right...” Saderia’s eyes glowed with hope. “He would know the most since he was Rock’s Second in Command. Rock probably told him a lot of interesting things.”

Jeb shivered uneasily. “So...we’re going to wait here until Thunder gets back?”

Saderia shrugged. “I don’t see why not. He did say we were welcome in his camp, and nobody seems too upset that we’re here.” Out of the corner of her eye, she gazed around at the outcasts and felt a tiny glimmer of surprise when she realized that what she said was true. Barely even noticing that they were there, the outcasts went about their daily business, barely sparing a glance at them or waving warmly if they did catch sight of them.

Turning away from her friends, Saderia gazed curiously around at the camp. Many outcasts simply lay splayed out on the ground, panting and resting their heads on their paws, as if the effort of standing was too much for their weak bodies. A small gleam of peace and happiness glowed behind the darkness in many of the dingoes’ eyes. Several outcasts lay close together, talking quietly and sharing a few measly bits of food. So used to thinking of dingoes as cruel, hardhearted, and selfish, Saderia felt stunned to see them actually helping each other. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one surprised.

“They’re actually *sharing*?” Dingo gaped in incredulity. His stunned light brown eyes grew wide as he gazed around at the dirty, peaceful camp. Slowly, he shook his head in amazement. “They *never* did that back when I lived in the pack.”

Blinking several times, he gazed around at the outcasts with eyes wide with awe, taking in everything around him. Several gaunt, dirty outcasts sat around in a circle near the left side of the camp. One took a bite out of a tiny piece of food, then passed it on to the next dingo, a tight smile on his face. Near the front of the camp, Bunny sat by her older brother, Lightning, a happy smile on her face. Several other dingoes sat around the two, handing the bigger remnants of their prey to the pup once they had gotten their fill. A few leaned down to clean her filthy black fur.

On the other side of camp, an elderly dingo with dirty gray fur hobbled toward the food pile, stumbling with every step. Just as he started to collapse, two younger dingoes raced toward him and pressed up against

him to support him. Holding him upright, the dingoes led him carefully over to the food pile. Despite how their ribs poked out of their dirty sides, both young canines sat back to give him room to eat, their eyes more sympathetic than jealous.

On the outskirts of camp, a canine around Dingo's age limped painfully toward the food pile. Blood and bruises covered one of his legs, rendering it useless. From across the camp, a dingo only slightly bigger than a pup darted toward the food pile, snatched up a tiny piece of prey, then rushed toward the limping dingo to drop it down at his feet, a wide smile on his face. With a faint grin, the injured dingo sat down to share the small piece.

Dingo blinked several times in shock and shook himself rapidly, as if coming out of a daze. "What should we do until Thunder gets back?" he murmured, his voice soft and absent.

Saderia shrugged absently. "I don't know...I guess just sit and wait."

"Okay." Dingo paused and studied the camp hopefully, then slowly turned back to face Saderia with cautious brown eyes. "Would you mind if we split up, so I could talk to some of the dingoes?"

A faint smile spread across Saderia's face and she nodded kindly. "That's fine. Go ahead. We'll keep an eye out for Thunder. You go catch up with your old pack mates."

Gratitude glimmered in Dingo's eyes. "Thank you." Dipping his head to her, he turned and hesitated, then slowly crept off toward the thick crowds of dingoes.

His eyes flicked curiously back and forth as he slunk through huge crowds of lanky outcasts. Warmth lit up his eyes. For once in their lives, dingoes were actually supporting each other instead of tearing each other down. He wished he could be a part of it. Deep down, he longed to find some way to help the outcasts and fit in with them. More than anything, he wished he could be one of them so he could talk with them, groan about the same annoying problems, laugh about the funny moments, and help them survive and prosper.

Grief stabbed at his chest. No matter how much he wanted to help them and be one of them, he couldn't. He was an outsider now. He had a new life—a better life—with friends, food, shelter, and safety in the forest.

He wasn't the Dingo they remembered, the one they might actually be able to relate to. Besides, he couldn't go back to this life—or at least, he shouldn't. There was no future for him here. Anyone with eyes could see that...

Nonetheless, he found himself moving closer and closer to the crowd of dingoes surrounding Lightning and Bunny. Four other dingoes besides the two siblings sat in a circle, sharing a few pieces of prey and laughing quietly at something Lightning said. Narrowing his eyes, Dingo hesitated, then slowly crept up to the crowd of dingoes. Some part of him hoped he might be able to join them even though he somehow doubted it...

"Uh...hi." Awkwardly, he crept up to the group of dingoes and weakly held up a paw in greeting, feeling thoroughly out of place. These dingoes had spent the last six months thinking he was dead and the twelve years before that hating his guts. How exactly did he expect to just creep into their lives now? To his surprise, the six dingoes looked up curiously, then grinned and instantly inched to the side to make room for him in their circle.

"Hi," Lightning replied, a warm smile on his face. "Did you want to join us?"

Dingo blinked in surprise, then nodded quickly. "Y-yes." His eyes flicked to the spot they had made for him. After a moment of hesitation, he slowly crept into the circle of dingoes and sat down with them, his eyes wide with amazement and nervousness.

Lightning grinned. "We were just talking about the other day. See, I was hunting with this dingo when all of a sudden, we heard one of Rock's followers coming. We hid behind a dune, then looked out and saw a pack member run out across the sand, looking for prey or us. We both tried to keep quiet. But then the guy I was with coughed. Rock's follower heard it and jumped up like he had been burned, then started looking for us."

A faint grin spread across his face. "So the guy with me ran to hide behind another dune and made a noise to make Rock's follower run toward him, so I could escape. But then we started having fun with it. We kept hiding behind different dunes, making noises, and driving this guy crazy. No matter what he did, he couldn't find us." He chuckled to himself and shook his head. "Rock's followers aren't exactly the sharpest spikes on the cactus."

Dingo snickered. "I wish I had been there."

"Me too. You blend in with the sand." Lightning paused to take a bite out of his piece of prey, then tossed it to Dingo. "Here, have some," he called. "You've been living with the forest food. You probably haven't tasted real food in a while."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock and he instantly pushed the food away. "No, I couldn't. It's yours." Dismay gleamed in his light brown eyes. Clearly, they needed the food more than he did. How could they offer him some of their hard-earned prey?

"Aw, come on." A disappointed look crossed Lightning's face despite his weak smile. "We all share. What? Are you too good for desert food now?"

Dingo blinked in surprise, then glanced down at the food in shame. Though they may need it more than he did, it wasn't right to turn them down and rub it in their faces that he was much better off. He hesitated for a long moment, then managed a weak smile. "Well, it *has* been a while." Cautiously, he leaned down and took a tiny bite of the prey. "It's good." He glanced curiously around at the others. "What now? Do I pass it on to someone else?"

When they nodded, he slid the prey over to the dingo next to him. Picking up the food, the outcast took a quick bite, then tossed it to the dingo on his right. Warmth washed over Dingo when he realized Lightning had given him the prey so he would fit in and seem more like them. No better, no worse. Just another dingo talking and sharing food. Hope shone in his eyes. Maybe he really could be one of them, at least for a while...

An outcast grinned at him. "So what's been going on with you? We heard you've been living with the forest food." His ears twitched in amusement. "I bet that's been interesting."

Dingo chuckled softly. "Yeah. It definitely has been."

Lightning's eyes shone with curiosity. "What's it like living in the forest?"

Dingo shrugged. "It's pretty nice over there. But every step I take, I swear there's always a sharp stick waiting to stab me. And the vines are like snakes over there."

One of the dingoes chuckled. "I can't imagine living in the forest. I mean, I could do it if I was desperate, but still. How do you breathe with all

those trees?”

Dingo grinned and lightly flicked his tail. “It’s pretty weird at first, but you get used to it after a while. Still...I’m kind of glad to be back home in the desert. The forest is nice, but this place is home. The forest is filled with all kinds of weird stuff anyway.”

A light brown outcast leaned in closer with interest. “Like what?”

Dingo shrugged and glanced thoughtfully around at his companions. “Well...I don’t know what it’s called, but they have this long, soft thing that they sleep on. It’s even softer than sand and really thick. Everyone over there sleeps on that instead of rock.”

Lightning’s eyes widened in shock. “No way! Are you serious?”

Dingo just grinned and nodded.

One of the dingoes gave him a playful push and grinned. “So you sleep on that now instead of rock? Don’t tell me you’re going soft on us!”

Dingo grinned and pushed him back. “No way! I barely even notice it!”

Lightning snickered and flicked him playfully with his tail. “Yeah, forget that! Dingoes don’t need anything fancy like that! We’re too tough!”

Dingo laughed and grinned with sparkling light brown eyes. “You got that right!”

Pride and happiness lit up Saderia’s amber irises. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Dingo laugh with the group of outcasts and grinned. If she didn’t know better, she would have thought he was one of them. Had he been told that, he probably would have been delighted. Tearing her gaze off Dingo, she stepped carefully through the camp. All around her, dingoes looked up and offered her friendly waves when she walked by. Smiling brightly, she waved back and shook her head in amazement. Never would she have thought that dingoes could ever be kind to each other, much less ‘forest food.’

Dark thoughts about what Bunny had told her haunted the back of her mind, but she forcefully pushed them away. Worrying about what Bunny had said wouldn’t provide her with any new answers and there was no sense in panicking about it until Thunder returned. Instead of merely sitting around longing for the outcast Leader to return, she decided to mingle with the other dingoes. She didn’t plan on questioning any more of

them the way she had questioned Bunny. All she wanted to do was talk to them a bit, gain their trust, and show them that she wanted to help. Actually, that idea had been Dash's.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Dash standing in front of a few outcasts, smiling confidently and chatting with the ragged canines. The outcasts grinned back and laughed along with him, their eyes friendly and warm. Surprise shone in Saderia's eyes when she realized how outgoing Dash was acting. Usually, he was the introvert who let her do all the talking. Now he sat in front of a wide crowd of dingoes, talking with them as if he had known them all his life. Jeb sat beside him, huddling close to him and watching the dingoes with uneasy blue and green eyes, seeming too afraid to leave Dash's side.

A smile crossed Saderia's face. Turning away from them, she looked around and spotted a friendly-looking dingo a few paces away. Pausing, she took a deep breath, then carefully crept up to the outcast. "Excuse me...Do you have any idea of when Thunder might return?"

The dingo looked up in surprise at the sound of her voice, then gave her an apologetic shrug. "No, I don't know when he might get back. He usually only stays out for a few hours, but sometimes, if he isn't back within that time, he ends up staying out for the whole day."

She let out a sigh. "Okay, thanks. I just really need to talk to him." She paused, then looked up hopefully. "Would it bother any of you if we spent the night here?"

The dingo shrugged. "Probably not. If you want to be sure, though, go talk to Brawny," he added, flicking his tail toward a burly canine with short, dark brown fur sitting a few paces away. "He's sort of Thunder's Second in Command."

"Okay, thanks." Saderia gave him a grateful nod, then turned and padded quickly toward the dark, muscular dingo. Thunder's outcast Second in Command sat near the center of camp with a crowd of other dingoes, talking animatedly and grinning at them. Trying to hide her unease, Saderia raised her voice and called out to him. "Brawny!"

The dark brown dingo looked up sharply, then quickly raised his paw to quiet the outcasts around him. A knowing gleam lit up his eyes when he spotted her. "Dingo's forest food, right?" he growled, his voice gruff but friendly. "What do you need?"

Saderia hid a grin. Even if it was a bit insulting, she found it kind of cute how all the outcasts seemed to call her ‘Dingo’s forest food.’ Shaking it off, she gave him a curious glance. “Someone told me Thunder might not be back until tomorrow. Is that true?”

Brawny’s eyes darkened and he nodded grimly. “Yeah, sometimes he’s out for a long time. He spies on Rock’s followers every now and then to see what’s going on in the pack.”

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. “I understand. It’s just that I really need to speak with him. I was wondering...could my friends and I spend the night here?”

Brawny narrowed his eyes uncertainly and cast a glance at Dingo. His gaze flicked past the laughing canine to Dash and Jeb, who sat talking eagerly with several outcasts. Turning back to Saderia, he gave her a faint nod. “That would be fine. But we don’t have dens or anything fancy like that. You would have to sleep out in the open with the rest of us.”

Saderia gave him a grateful smile. “That’s fine. We’re used to that.”

“All right.” Brawny nodded curtly, then reluctantly glanced over at the food pile. “If you get hungry...I guess you can have some of our food, but don’t take too much...”

“Oh, no, that’s all right.” Saderia gave him a weak smile. “We brought our own.”

Relief shone in his eyes. “You should be fine then. Find me if you need anything.”

“Thank you.” Dipping her head to the outcast Second in Command, Saderia turned and scanned the camp, letting his eyes flick to Dash and Jeb, who had started to walk away from the wide group of dingoes after saying a friendly goodbye. Smiling, she bounded toward them and skidded to a halt beside Dash.

“We’re probably going to be spending the night,” she explained when Dash looked up with a questioning look.

Jeb frowned and dropped his voice to a fearful whisper. “You think it’s safe?”

“It’s fine.” Dash flicked him lightly with his tail and grinned. “All these dingoes seem nice, so I’m sure we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Jeb shrank back uncomfortably, but managed a weak nod. “If you’re sure...”

Dash pricked his ears thoughtfully. “Should we go tell Dingo?”

Saderia glanced back to see Dingo laughing heartily with his new friends. Slowly, she shook her head and smiled. “No, let’s not interrupt him. We can tell him later tonight.”

Stars twinkled in the night sky, bathing the outcast camp in silver light. Silence haunted the tranquil camp. Sleep crept up on Saderia and her friends, pulling them into a deep, peaceful darkness. Slowly, Saderia and Dash opened their eyes into sheer blackness and watched as two different parts of the spirit realm took shape before their eyes. Two different voices whispered in their ears the moment their eyes fluttered open.

“You have to stay.”

In a ghostly, blue-hued desert made of rolling, sleepy sand dunes, Saderia gazed up at Claw. Surrounded by shadowy woods in an eerily illuminated clearing covered in thick, wintry grass, Dash looked up at Dastarius. Their response was the same.

“I will.”

Chapter Seventeen

Trust

“So how long do I need to stay?” Saderia sat back on the ghostly sand of the sleepy spirit realm and faced Claw calmly, her amber eyes glittering with curiosity.

The spirit shrugged and lightly flicked her fluffy tail. “As long as you need.”

Saderia nodded thoughtfully, then let a faint smile creep across her face. “So I was right? I really did make the right decision?”

Claw’s light brown eyes twinkled in the faint, blue-tinged light of the spirit world. “I think so. We’ll just have to see how this all plays out.”

She grinned eagerly. “All right. Thanks, Claw. I guess I’ll stay with the dingoes for a while until I feel it’s right to go. I’ll check with you before I leave, though.”

Claw blinked in surprise, then smiled. “Thank you. I appreciate your faith in me.”

Saderia just shrugged. “You’re my spirit guide. Of course I have faith in you.”

A weak smile crossed Claw’s face and she heaved a weary sigh. “Thank you.”

“I’ve been trying to gain the outcasts’ trust, like you told me to. I’ve been telling them a little bit about our forest—you know, the good parts—so that they look up to us.” Dash looked up at his father, who sat a few paces away on the stiff grass, and smiled when he saw a faint grin cross his face. “They’ve already let us spend the night, thanks to Saderia, so I’ll keep talking to them and gaining their trust for however long she decides to stay. In the meantime, she’s been getting all the information she can out of them.”

Dastarius’s amber eyes glimmered in the faint light. “Nice work, son.”

A glow of warmth swept over Dash at the praise and he couldn't hide a slight smile. "Thanks." He paused, then frowned in wonder. "So how long should I stay?"

"I'll leave that decision to the Princess," Dastarius replied, giving a light flick of his tail. "Or you. In the meantime, just keep doing what you've been doing. I'll watch you and make sure everything is going according to plan. That way, the next time I see you, I can tell you what else you can do to get the outcasts to trust you and look up to you. For instance, you might want to start putting some...ideas in their heads."

Dash tipped his head to the side in confusion. "What kind of ideas?"

Dastarius shrugged coolly. "Just some things they might want to think about. But I'll go into that more another time. There's only one thing we should focus on right now." The dark lion paused, then slowly looked up to meet Dash's gaze with a mischievous grin. His amber eyes flashed, and without warning, he lunged toward Dash in one quick movement.

Instantly, Dash leapt to his feet and dodged to the side before Dastarius could even come close to him. Landing neatly on the grass a few paces away, Dash whirled around to face his father in a flash of incredible speed, a challenging gleam in his eyes.

Dastarius landed elegantly on the grass and turned smoothly to face him. A satisfied grin curled up the corners of his mouth. "Good. You're more alert tonight. And you're faster."

Dash grinned back at him and playfully lashed his tail. "You want to wipe this sneer off my face, don't you?" he taunted.

Dastarius snickered and raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to let me?"

Dash sneered back and dug his claws deep into the earth. "No way!"

Dastarius's eyes gleamed and he crouched down on the grass, preparing to pounce. "Then perhaps I should up my game."

"Bring it on!" Dash retorted, his eyes glowing and his tail lashing playfully.

With a low growl, Dastarius lunged at him. Instantly, Dash leapt away to avoid him, but Dastarius's outstretched paws grazed his leg before he could get away. Shaking it off, Dash landed steadily on the ground and whirled around to see Dastarius land smoothly behind him and turn to face him. In one quick movement, Dastarius lashed out at his face, but Dash

ducked down to avoid the hit. Before his father could aim another attack, Dash darted in a wide arc around Dastarius as fast as he could. When the dark ghost tried to turn around, Dash leapt at him from behind and landed squarely on his back. With a triumphant grin, Dash slammed his paws down on his shoulders to bring him down, but Dastarius twisted in one sudden movement, sending Dash flying to the ground with a stunned yelp.

A groan escaped his throat when he hit the ground hard and rolled to the side. His heart raced and he felt his eyes widen, knowing he couldn't waste a moment. Quickly, he rolled around to see Dastarius loom over him and aim an attack at his face, his ghostly claws unsheathed. Just in time, Dash rolled to the side and scrambled to his paws. Before Dastarius could turn to face him, he lashed out and swiped his father's leg out from underneath him.

The dark lion stumbled backward, but caught himself easily and lunged toward Dash with barely a second of hesitation. His paws met with Dash's shoulders, pushing him backward onto the cold, ghostly grass. With a yelp, Dash hit the ground hard on his back and glared when Dastarius shoved a paw onto his dark brown chest to hold him down. Thinking quickly and not wanting to be defeated, Dash yanked a fistful of grass out of the earth and flung it into Dastarius's face. Stunned, Dastarius jerked back just enough for Dash to kick him away and scramble to his feet. Instantly, Dash crouched down to pounce at him. The second he leapt at him, though, Dastarius dodged easily to the side, then whirled around to face him, his dark brown fur almost a blur.

Panting heavily and grinning with exhilaration, Dash laughed. "You tired yet?"

Dastarius snorted and sneered back. "Are you kidding?"

"Well, you *are* old!" Dash taunted, his eyes gleaming with playfulness.

Dastarius chuckled. "I can keep this up all night. You'll collapse first."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "You want to bet?"

Dastarius just rolled his eyes and raced toward him. Instantly, Dash leapt away from him when he tried to attack and landed smoothly a few feet away. His amber eyes glowed with determination in the eerie light of the

dream clearing. No matter what, he planned to keep this up for as long as it took to prove that he would come out victorious.

“*Don’t* pounce on him again,” Saderia warned, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation and shooting Dingo a stern glare. “Dash deserves to sleep in if he wants.”

Dingo sighed and gave her a playful flick of his tail. “You never let me have any fun.”

Saderia just rolled her eyes and tried to hide a smile. Stretching out her tired legs, she gazed down at her lion friend, who lay splayed out on the warm desert sand, still fast asleep. Every now and then, he winced in his sleep, as if having some strange, painful nightmare. Despite her best attempts to wake him up, he remained deeply asleep. Dingo had offered to pounce him awake, but as thoughtful as that was, she had to turn him down.

Giving her a grin, Dingo turned and gazed out at the outcast camp as the other dingoes started to wake up. All around camp, outcasts groggily lifted their heads and looked around, blinking against the harsh sunlight. The soft murmur of conversation floated around camp as outcasts rose to their paws and crept over to their friends to talk.

Dingo’s light brown eyes shone in the faint morning light. Never taking his eyes off the dingoes, he gave Saderia a light tap of his tail. “I’m going to go mingle for a while. I’ll keep an eye out for Thunder, too.”

“All right.” She gave him a warm smile and a friendly flick of her tail. “Don’t worry about looking for Thunder, though. I’ll go to the edge of the camp to watch for him myself.”

Dingo shot her a grateful smile. “Thanks.” Turning, he strolled amiably into camp, calling good morning to a few outcasts and looking around for familiar faces.

Saderia smiled and watched him leave, then turned around to see Jeb standing a few paces behind her, eyeing the camp nervously. Her gaze softened and she rested her tail gently on his shoulder. “Jeb, I’m going to go wait on the edge of camp. Would it be okay if I left you here to wait for Dash to wake up?”

Jeb’s head shot up in alarm and his eyes darted wildly to the mangy outcasts roaming the camp. “Are...are you sure these dingo things aren’t dangerous?”

Saderia gave him a firm nod. "Yes, I'm sure, Jeb. You'll be fine. Besides, I'm sure Dash will wake up soon."

Jeb hesitated, then managed a weak, shaky nod. "A-All right. I guess I'll be fine."

Saderia gave him a warm smile and flicked him gently with her tail before turning and padding out into the crowds of outcasts to find the edge of camp. A hint of guilt burned in her mind at leaving Jeb alone, but she knew he would be fine. None of the outcasts seemed to want to hurt any of them, and even if they did, they probably lacked the strength to do it. Even if they did make a move to hurt Jeb, she and Dingo would probably make it over to him in two seconds to tell the outcasts to back off.

A soft voice sounded behind her, making her ears prick up in surprise. Pausing in a crowd of dirty canines, she glanced back to see a group of skinny dingoes hesitantly creep up to Jeb, their eyes wide with wonder and curiosity.

"So you're from the weird forest?" one asked, his eyes bright with amazement.

Jeb shrank back nervously and cast a fearful glance at Saderia out of the corner of his eye. Meeting his gaze, Saderia gave him a quick nod and gestured toward the dingoes, signaling for him to relax and talk to them.

Swallowing nervously, Jeb shakily looked up to meet the dingoes' gazes, his blue/green eyes wide with fear. "The...the one on that side of the desert?" he stammered, gesturing shakily to the east. When the dingoes nodded, he shivered and shrank back uneasily. "Uh...y-yes, that's where I'm from."

The dingoes' eyes widened in incredulity. "So the stories are true?" One of them gaped at Jeb in astonishment. "Is it really weird over there? Or dangerous?"

Jeb shrugged uncomfortably. "It's not weird to me. But I guess it could be considered kind of dangerous..."

Interest and wonder gleamed in the eyes of one of the canines. "Why? What goes on in there? Are there...a lot of your kind?"

Jeb slowly relaxed, seeing the wonder in the dingoes' eyes and realizing they were only curious. Letting out a soft sigh, he slowly sat back to face the dingoes and cautiously started to tell them about his forest. A

faint smile crossed his face as the dingoes listened intently, hanging on every word and staring at him with a mixture of awe and amazement.

Chuckling softly to herself, Saderia turned around and crept through the outcast camp, heading toward the outskirts to wait for Thunder. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the ragged dingoes she passed, feeling a wave of sympathy. A few paces away from her, she spotted the yellow outcast Lightning laying close beside his sister, Bunny. While Lightning sleepily raised his head and looked around, the skinny pup remained deeply asleep, her short tail curled around her nose. With a soft sigh, Saderia decided not to disturb them even though she longed to talk to the knowledgeable pup once more.

Her eyes locked on Bunny and a strange feeling of wonder swept over her. Something about the tiny pup puzzled her. When Saderia had questioned her, she had seemed to know so much and had given so many details, as if she had known how important it was. Most animals her age wouldn't give answers quite so descriptive. Somehow, the pup seemed older than she really was and knew way too much for her age. Considering the life she had been forced to live, though, maybe that wasn't so surprising.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, Saderia turned around and bounded past a few groups of dingoes, then skidded to a halt on the very edge of camp. With a soft sigh, she sat back on the searing hot sand and gazed out at the desert as the sun rose up on the horizon, casting bright light out over the desert. With nothing to occupy herself, her thoughts raced. For the first time in forever, she thought about her father. A pang of guilt shot through her when she wondered if he was holding up all right. Were Cia and Uncle Jash upset, too, or were they calm enough to help Makero keep himself together? A heavy sigh escaped her throat. Part of her regretted leaving, but in her heart, she knew it had been the right thing to do.

Vaguely, she wondered how repairs were going back at the forest and her thoughts turned to her old forest home. Wincing, she prepared herself for the flash of homesickness that always accompanied thoughts of her home. This time, though, nothing came. A dull gleam of understanding and acceptance dawned in her eyes. She no longer *needed* her home as much as she used to. Home was with her friends now.

Paw steps thudded rapidly against the sandy ground behind her, shaking her out of her thoughts and making her look back in surprise.

Dingo raced toward her rapidly and skidded to a halt behind her, his light brown eyes blazing with excitement.

A grin crossed his face at the sight of Saderia's surprised expression. "Hey, Saderia. Some of the guys are going out hunting and they want me to come with them. I told them I had to check with you first." His tail wriggled wildly back and forth. "Can I?"

She giggled softly and shook her head in amusement. Dingo looked like a light-hearted pup with a wagging tail and shining brown eyes. "Of course," she replied, unable to keep the smile out of her voice. "Have fun. If Thunder shows up while you're out, I'll talk to him myself."

Dingo's eyes lit up with excitement, but he frowned cautiously. "Are you sure?"

Saderia nodded and smiled. "Yes, I can do it myself. I already know what I need to ask." Giving him a warm grin, she gestured to the wide open desert before her. "Go have fun with your friends. Just be careful and don't stay out too late or I'll be worried."

A bright, eager grin spread across his face and he nodded quickly. "Okay. We'll only be out for an hour or so. I promise."

A faint smile crept across her face. "All right. I'll see you later then."

Dingo's eyes gleamed with excitement and he dipped his head to her, then turned and raced back through the camp, leaving clouds of dust behind him. A small group of dingoes waited for him near the center of camp. The instant Dingo reached them, the group turned and darted toward the camp outskirts. Soon, they disappeared from sight.

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia started to turn back around to gaze out at the desert, then froze at the sound of a soft voice behind her. "Saderia?"

Whirling around, she blinked in surprise, then grinned. Dash stood behind her, his unruly mane sticking out in ragged clumps and his eyes half-closed and exhausted.

A faint smile twitched at the corners of her mouth and she rolled her eyes. "Good morning, Dash. It's about time you got up."

"Sorry." Dash let out a long yawn and shrugged tiredly. "How long did I sleep in?"

“Just a little while,” Saderia replied, giving a light shrug. Narrowing her eyes, she studied him more closely and raised an eyebrow at his rough, disheveled appearance. “Jeez, Dash, you look rough. You look like you’ve been fighting in your sleep.”

Dash chuckled nervously and looked away. “Yeah...Funny, that.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then just shrugged and gazed back out at the desert. “Well, anyway, I’m glad you’re up. Dingo left a few minutes ago. Now I’m just waiting for Thunder.”

“Okay.” Dash shook himself a few times, as if trying to wake himself up. “You want me to mingle with the outcasts?”

Saderia smiled and nodded gratefully. “Yes, that would be great.”

Dash simply nodded, then turned and padded groggily back into camp. Catching sight of a nearby group of dingoes, he padded over to them and easily struck up a conversation. Leaving them alone to chat, Saderia turned and gazed out at the sandy horizon. Rays of sunlight streamed out over the desert as the sun rose high in the sky, temporarily blinding her. Blinking the light out of her eyes, she gazed absently at the hazy desert, then froze when a yellow brown figure suddenly lunged over the top of a faraway sand dune.

Her heart skipped a beat and she instantly rose to her paws. A relieved smile crossed her face when the figure bounded closer and she was able to make out the familiar face of Thunder. With gleaming dark brown eyes, the outcast Leader raced across the sand dunes, then lunged into the camp, carrying several small pieces of prey. Smiling faintly, Thunder padded quickly into the center of camp and dropped the food onto the tiny food pile, a satisfied gleam in his eyes. Every dingo around him looked up in surprise at his arrival, then smiled, calling greetings and congratulating him on his hunt.

Weaving through crowds of outcasts gathering around their Leader, Saderia stumbled into the center of camp and crept up to the yellow brown dog. “Thunder?”

Thunder turned as the other outcasts started to wander away. A sheepish smile crossed his face when he spotted her standing behind him. “Hey...I know I said I would be back yesterday, but I got distracted. I was actually looking for two outcasts that disappeared from camp a while ago, but I...couldn’t find them.” A shadow flitted across Thunder’s face and he

quickly looked away, heaving a soft sigh. Dismay gleamed in Saderia's eyes when she realized what he meant, but before she could speak, he wearily met her gaze. "I didn't think you would still be here. Did you and your friends spend the night?"

Saderia nodded hesitantly. "I hope that's okay. Your Second in Command, Brawny, told us we could stay."

Thunder waved her worries away with a flick of his tail. "That's fine. Anyway, what is it you want?"

Saderia hesitated uncertainly, then cautiously met his gaze. "Well... if it's okay with you, I was kind of hoping I could ask you some questions about Rock and the pack to try to figure out what's been going on. Is that okay?"

Thunder shrugged and nodded. "Sure. Ask away."

"Okay..." Saderia paused, trying to gather her thoughts. "Well, I was talking to Bunny yesterday since she happened to overhear me and my friends talking, and she told us a few things. She told us that Rock didn't just post guards on the forest borders to stop you from getting food, but also to look out for forest animals. She also told us that you are the Leader of the outcasts and that Rock doesn't have a Second in Command at all. She also told me a bit about how you became Leader. Is that all true?"

A faint smile crossed Thunder's face. "Yes, that's all true. I don't know how Bunny learns all this stuff, but she always seems to know everything that's going on."

"I see." Saderia hesitated, then studied him carefully, her eyes narrowed with unease. "She also told us that Rock was keeping a prisoner in his camp."

Thunder's eyes darkened. "Oh. She told you about that, too, huh?"

Saderia nodded grimly. "Yes. I was hoping you could tell me more about that."

Thunder heaved a sigh and slowly sat back, his eyes shadowed. "Yes, that was one of the more disturbing things Rock did." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Rock does have a prisoner. He's been holding her hostage for about a month. Maybe longer. I don't know what he's planning to do with her. I tried to figure it out before, but he never told me much and he never let me get close to her. He keeps her in a prison beneath his own den and keeps it sealed and guarded at all times by his most loyal

dingoes. He's the only one who's ever seen her. He's the only one who's questioned her."

A wave of cold swept over Saderia. "Did he ever ask her what her name was?"

"He probably did, but he never told me what it was." The outcast Leader gave her an apologetic shrug. "I wish I could help you more, but that's honestly all I know. He captured her in the desert about a month or so ago, then took her and held her in that prison. I know he has some great 'master plan' involving her, but I don't know what it is."

A shiver raced down Saderia's spine. Biting her lip, she started to ask something else, then broke off abruptly when a harsh, fearful sound split the air.

Howls erupted from somewhere behind them, making Saderia and Thunder whirl around in shock. Gasps sounded all throughout the camp as outcasts whipped around to see what was going on. In the distance, three outcasts streamed frantically down the side of a faraway sand dune, howling in terror at the top of their lungs.

"Everybody hide!" one of the outcasts shouted.

Another let out a wild, desperate howl. "Pack members are coming!"

The outcasts' eyes widened in shock. Panic spread through the camp like wildfire the instant the words left the fleeing canine's mouth. Screams of terror rang through the camp. Outcasts ran in every direction, pushing past one another and racing desperately to get away as the three howling outcasts bounded into camp. Paws trampled the ground wildly, throwing up thick clouds of sand. Terror glowed in the eyes of every canine.

Panting with fear, outcasts shoved wildly past Thunder and Saderia, nearly knocking them off their paws. Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia saw Lightning lean down and grab Bunny by the scruff of her neck, then race toward the edge of the camp. Near the outskirts of camp, Dash and Jeb looked up frantically, their eyes widening in alarm. Saderia's mind whirled with fear as outcasts flew past her in a blur of grimy fur.

A loud, booming howl suddenly rang out over the camp, echoing over the cries of fear. "Silence!" Thunder shouted, raising his voice and gazing around at his camp with narrowed brown eyes gleaming with fear. "Everyone, grab the food and kick sand over the remains! Head for the tall

dunes on the opposite side of camp to hide! Hide in pairs, keep as low to the ground as possible, and do not make a sound!”

Tense silence fell over the camp as Thunder’s words rang out. Whimpering with fear, outcasts streamed toward the tall dunes opposite the ones the fleeing dingoes had come from. Holding back cries of fear, several outcasts swept toward the food pile and grabbed as many pieces as they could. One outcast raced past the empty pile and kicked a cloud of sand over the remains before racing for the dunes, his eyes glowing with terror. Soundlessly, the outcasts dove toward the tall dunes bordering their camp and leapt over the top of them. Some limped desperately to keep up, while others pressed against the wounded to help. As a whole, the outcasts raced toward the sand dunes, shaking with fear.

Saderia gazed out at the pandemonium with wide eyes and bristling fur. What should she do now? Hide with them?

Gazing around at his camp, Thunder slowly turned to face her, his eyes shadowed and grave. “Find your friends and follow me,” he growled. “We have to hide.”

Saderia nodded quickly and whipped around to call her friends, but before the words ever left her mouth, Dash and Jeb burst out from a crowd of fleeing outcasts, their eyes wild with fear. Panting heavily, they raced to Saderia’s side and skidded to an abrupt halt, their fur bristling with alarm.

“What’s going on?” Dash demanded. “What do we do?”

“Come with me.” Thunder gave them a firm glare. “We have to get out of here!”

Saderia’s eyes widened in alarm. “Wait!” she cried out, desperately holding up a paw to stop him. “What about Dingo? He went out this morning with a few others...”

Thunder’s eyes darkened grimly. “He’s going to have to fend for himself. Now hurry! We haven’t got much time!”

Dismay gleamed in Saderia’s eyes, but before she could protest, Thunder leapt away from her. Hitting the ground roughly, he raced toward the sand dunes as fast as he could, leading his outcasts. Terror burned in Saderia’s heart, but when she saw the fear shining in her friends’ eyes, she knew she had to run. Gritting her teeth, she whipped around and raced after the outcast Leader as fast as she could with her friends close behind her.

Throwing up clouds of sand in her wake, she raced with the crowd of outcasts to the top of the tall sand dunes bordering the camp and leapt behind them. Her heart hammered wildly with fear. Ignoring the terror rising in her chest, she instantly stumbled to the bottom of the sand dune and crouched down low to the ground to hide behind the massive hill. Dash and Jeb immediately raced down the side of the dune and crouched down beside her, their fur bristling with fear and their eyes wide with alarm.

Terror swirled through Saderia's mind. Where was Dingo? Was he safe? Her head spun with worry and dismay. Dingo was always there to fend off enemy dogs when they threatened them. Why couldn't he be there to protect them this time when they needed him?

Taking a deep breath, she pushed away the thought, reminding herself that she and Dash could fight. Looking up, she saw the last few outcasts bound over the tops of the dunes and race to the bottom. Whimpering fearfully, the starved canines crouched down at the bottom of the dunes across from her, their fur bristling. Behind every dune, outcasts huddled together, not making a sound. From where he stood crouched at the bottom of a nearby dune, Thunder met her gaze and gave her a firm nod. She nodded back, then lowered her head and forced herself to keep quiet. Tense silence fell over the desert.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia slowly curled her tail close to her body to make sure it didn't stick out. Her shoulders stiffened and all of her muscles tensed with fear. All she could hear in the silent desert was the frantic beating of her heart. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to keep close to the ground and be still, painfully aware of how vulnerable she was with her head tucked between her paws and her body curled up in a ball. Keeping her ears pricked, she strained to listen for any sign of the enemy approaching.

Silence hung thickly over the desert. For what felt like hours, she heard nothing—no paw steps, no growls, no voices. All she could hear was her heart pounding and the hoarse breathing of her friends. After what felt like ages, a low, cold growl suddenly sounded from somewhere behind the sand dune in the outcasts' empty camp.

"Where are they?" a dark voice snarled.

A shiver raced through Saderia. Rock's followers must be in Thunder's camp...

Another gruff voice let out a scornful snarl. “They probably hid somewhere.”

A new voice spoke up in a gravelly tone. “Are you sure anyone was here?”

“Yeah.” A fourth voice chuckled coldly. “I thought I heard screaming. Someone’s hiding around here, so start looking. You know what the reward is for killing outcasts.”

Paw steps sounded on the other side of the dune as the pack members started to search for the outcasts. With each second that passed, the harsh thud of paw steps sounded louder and louder. Horror swept over Saderia. The pack members were getting closer—not only to her, but to Thunder and the outcasts. Her heart sank and her entire body went numb with fear. There was no way to run...If the pack members came any closer, they would be able to see over the sand dunes. If they looked over the dunes, they would easily find them...

Her heart skipped and all the fur on her back rose up in alarm. How long until the pack members discovered them? Tension hung over her and all the outcasts. Too afraid to lift her head and look around for fear of being spotted, all she could do was stay there, crouched in the sand, waiting for them to either discover her or leave. Fear made her entire body feel cold. Desperately, she told herself that there were only a handful of pack members and a whole camp full of outcasts. Every outcast would fight if they were found. How much could a pack of starved dogs do, though? They might have numbers, but strength was a different story. And what if the pack members sent for reinforcements?

A shiver raced down her spine. More than anything, she wished Dingo was with them. Her desert friend had been evading pack members all his life and had fought off plenty of them before. If anyone was crafty enough to fight off four or more pack members without letting their enemies race back to camp for reinforcements, it was him.

The loud sound of paw steps jolted her out of her thoughts, making her eyes widen in alarm. Her heart froze as the paw steps grew louder. With a jolt of horror, she realized the pack members were heading straight toward the dune she was hiding behind.

“Let’s look over here,” one of the pack members shouted, a sneer in his voice. “I bet those filthy outcasts didn’t get far.”

Saderia's heart hammered in her chest. Unsheathing her claws, she raised her head just enough to stare at the top of the dune where sunlight glinted off the sand. Around her, Dash tensed and unsheathed his claws, preparing for a fight, while Jeb shrank back against the ground. Fear rose in Saderia's chest, but she narrowed her eyes in a glare of determination. Any minute now, the pack members would leap to the top of the sand dune and discover them. But she would be waiting for them when they did.

"Oh no..."

Dingo blinked and glanced up at his skinny companion in confusion, dropping the piece of prey in his jaws onto the sand. "What is it?"

"Shh!" Standing on the steep slope of a tall sand dune a few paces ahead of him, the light brown outcast looked back and shushed him, then beckoned for him to come closer. Ignoring Dingo's mystified expression, the outcast crouched down on the ground and inched closer to the top of the tall sand dune, peering out at the desert below. A grave shadow haunted his eyes.

Frowning, Dingo hesitated, then slowly crept toward the top of the dune after him. When the outcast at the top gestured frantically for him to crouch down, he reluctantly lowered himself to the ground. Creeping up the sandy slope, he huddled beside his light brown companion and peered out over the dune, his shaggy brown fur blending in with the sand. Behind him, his three other hunting partners crept up curiously beside him to look out at the desert.

Shock glimmered in Dingo's eyes when he peered over the top of the sand dune into what used to be Thunder's outcast camp. The makeshift camp was completely abandoned of the crowds of dingoes that had once lived there. In their place were five burly canines standing on the flat land, scanning the surrounding sand dunes with suspicious, bloodthirsty glares. Each of them looked strong and well-fed.

A dark, wary frown crossed Dingo's face. "Pack members?"

The light brown outcast nodded grimly. "Looks like it."

Unease colored his eyes as he stared at the empty camp. "Where are the others?"

"Probably hiding," another of his companions muttered beside him, studying the camp with shadowed blue eyes. "They must be hiding just

behind those sand dunes.”

Dingo blinked, then looked up at the tall sand dunes bordering the opposite side of Thunder’s camp. All the fur on his back rose up in alarm when the pack members started stalking toward the dunes, an eager gleam in their eyes. Outcasts must be hiding behind those sandy hills...

Alarm blazed in his light brown eyes. “They’re heading toward those sand dunes,” he hissed. “I think there *are* outcasts behind them. What happens if they find them?”

Fear shone in all of the outcasts’ eyes. Several of them sucked in a shaky breath.

“Uh oh...” one whispered.

Blinking rapidly, Dingo whipped around to stare at his companions’ horrified faces. Their grave expressions said only one thing: If those pack members found the others, the few outcasts with him would probably be the only ones left. His heart skipped a beat and a dark shadow flitted across his face. Gritting his teeth, he whirled back around to stare at the pack members, his mind whirling with fear. What if Saderia was behind those dunes? What if she got hurt? What if the outcasts got killed? A dark, determined gleam crept into his light brown eyes. He couldn’t just sit around and wait for a fight to break out...

Narrowing his eyes, he slowly rose up from his crouched position and slunk away from his companions. “Wait here,” he whispered, creeping back down the slope of the sand dune.

All four outcasts whipped around to stare at him in surprise, their eyes wide with shock.

“Where are you going?” one hissed, his eyes narrowed in confusion.

“It doesn’t matter.” Dingo turned and determinedly met their gazes with firm, shadowed brown eyes. “Stay here and don’t move unless you have to.”

Before the outcasts could question him, he whipped around and darted down the side of the sand dune. Keeping low to the ground, he turned instantly when he reached the bottom of the dune and darted off to the left. With light, quick movements, he weaved through the sea of tall dunes, putting as much distance between himself and his hunting companions as possible. His shaggy brown fur blended in perfectly with the light brown sand. No one saw him running. A faint, grim smile crossed his

face. Just as he had hoped, he was still good at running unseen between sand dunes. The skill was one he would probably never forget.

Shaking the thoughts from his head, he skidded to a halt at the bottom of a tall sand dune overlooking the outcast camp. His hunting companions remained at the top of the faraway sand dune—just far enough away that they wouldn't be seen during his crazy stunt. Dingo licked his lips and bunched his muscles. Not giving himself time to think, he leapt to the top of the tall dune, threw back his head, and let out a loud, booming howl.

Instantly, all five pack members whipped around, their mouths gaping open in shock. Each pack member froze in place, their eyes wide with disbelief. The five of them exchanged a quick, stunned glance, then narrowed their eyes. Bloodlust blazed in their eyes and they bared their fangs. Abandoning their previous search, they let out low snarls and raced toward him.

The second they started charging toward him, Dingo whipped around and leapt off the top of the sand dune. Pack members thundered up the slope and over the top of the sandy hill, but Dingo just chuckled. His paws landed neatly on the gritty ground. Without hesitating, he took off running as fast as he could, keeping so low to the ground his belly brushed the sand and racing in the direction opposite the outcast camp. The pack members raced after him, howling and snarling as if they were chasing a piece of prey.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dingo glanced back at the land behind him. The pack members chased after him furiously, throwing up thick clouds of sand in their wake. All five of them were hard on his heels, just a few good paces behind him. Perfect. The closer they were to him, the faster they left the outcast camp behind.

Instantly, Dingo whipped around and darted across the sand as fast as his legs could carry him, using his old trick of weaving between the sand dunes and stringing along his pursuers with every step. A wild, crazy grin spread across his face as he bolted away from his howling pursuers. Every last one of them thirsted for his blood, and if they ever caught him, he would probably end up dead, but that was part of the fun. For the first time in a long time, he actually felt *alive*. And it felt *good*.

Laughter bubbled out of his chest. “Catch me if you can, suckers!” With his pursuers hot on his trail, he darted behind a sand dune, snickering the entire time.

Chapter Eighteen

Gratitude

A deafening howl split the hot desert air. All the fur on Saderia's back rose up in alarm and she looked up sharply. On the other side of the sand dune, the thudding sound of the pack members' paw steps abruptly cut off. The echoing howl faded into the distance and a tense quiet crept over the desert. Seconds later, furious howls rang out from behind the sand dune. Paws thundered viciously against the sand, then slowly faded away into the distance, as if the pack members had retreated. Soon, the sound disappeared entirely.

Silence fell over the desert. Saderia and the pack of outcasts stood rigidly still behind the sand dunes, too afraid to speak, move, or breathe. After a long moment of tense quiet, Thunder slowly rose to his paws and crept up the side of the dune he was hiding behind. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, Saderia took a deep breath and silently started to creep up the slope of her own dune. Both of them crouched near the tops of their sand dunes and gazed down at the sandy land. The outcast camp was completely abandoned. No pack members were anywhere in sight. A few light paw prints in the sand indicated that they had run wildly off to the left, leaving the camp behind.

Thunder slowly gazed out at the camp and surrounding sand dunes, his dark brown eyes narrowed with caution. After scanning the desert for a long moment, the outcast Leader let out a long sigh of relief. "You can come out now!" he called, glancing back at the fearful outcasts crouched behind the dunes. "The pack members are gone!"

Nobody moved. Only after a long moment of hesitation did the outcasts slowly rise to their paws and peek out around the dunes. Fear haunted their eyes, but one by one, they started to creep out from behind the sandy hills, whispering quietly to their neighbors. Their legs shook with terror, but a few managed weak smiles when they saw their home was truly abandoned. Slowly, every outcast slunk out from behind the sand dunes and

crept back into their camp. Murmuring nervously to each other, all of the outcasts huddled nervously together in the center of camp and looked up at Thunder, waiting for orders.

Behind her, Dash and Jeb slowly crept up to the top of the dune on either side of Saderia, gazing out at the desert with stunned eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced at them and heaved a relieved sigh, grateful that they hadn't been hurt. Why had the pack members left, though? Unease glimmered in her eyes. It almost seemed as if someone had...led them away. Was it the animal who had howled? Who was that?

Realization washed over her like a wave of ice water. *Dingo*. He had been the one who had led the pack members away. Her heart skipped a beat. Was he *insane*? Her mind whirled, but before she could think of what to do, she saw Thunder gesture to them with his tail.

"Come on!" he called, giving them a stern look. "I have to speak with the others."

"O-of course," Saderia stammered, biting back a protest. Flicking her tail to signal for Dash and Jeb to follow, she darted down the sand dune into the outcast camp. Slowly, she crept up to the crowd of outcasts and stood just a few paces off to the side. Behind her, Thunder slid down the sand dune and stepped up to the crowd of outcasts to face them with dark, dull brown eyes.

Just as he started to speak, Saderia whirled around to face him with wide, urgent amber eyes. "You're not planning on making them leave, are you?"

Thunder blinked and looked back at her in surprise. "Actually, I was. Not right now, though. We'll have to wait until the dingoes who went out to hunt today come back. Right now, I'm just going to ask them who is missing, so we know who to wait for."

Saderia took a deep breath and nodded gratefully. "Thank you. Dingo's one of the ones who's missing." She paused, then lowered her voice. "He was the one who howled when we were hiding. Those pack members left because they were chasing him. I don't know where he went, but I'm sure he'll be back soon. He's outrun pack members before."

Thunder blinked in surprise, then gave her a nod and rested his tail reassuringly on her shoulder. "I'm sure he will be. If Dingo's anything, he's a survivor." He angled his ears toward the group of outcasts and flicked his

tail. “Now why don’t you and your friends go sit with the others while I figure out who we need to wait for.”

Saderia let out a soft sigh and nodded weakly. “All right. Thank you.” Flicking her tail, she signaled for her friends to follow her, then led the way into the thick, anxious crowd.

Weaving through the tightly packed group of outcasts, Saderia sat down on an empty patch of sand next to Lightning and Bunny. The skinny yellow outcast kept his tail wrapped tightly around his little sister and held her close to him. Out of the corner of her eye, Bunny shot him a dirty look for being so protective, but didn’t bother to move. Her expression remained cool and unbothered. Vaguely, Saderia wondered if Bunny even understood what had just happened. The tiny pup didn’t seem the slightest bit ruffled.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she looked up at Thunder as he announced that they would once again have to move to a new camp. Nearly all the outcasts around her let out a groan, but didn’t protest. Soon, Thunder started collecting names of missing outcasts. Gradually, the outcasts gave him names until everyone had been accounted for.

One outcast pricked his ears. “Should someone go look for the missing ones?”

At the head of the huge crowd, Thunder shook his head firmly. “No. We don’t know where they are, and if some of us left to find the others, we would only be missing even more of us. We’ll wait a few hours to give the others time to return. If they’re not back by then, we’ll have to leave anyway.”

Saderia’s heart sank. Several outcasts started to protest and she opened her mouth to add her own voice to the mix, but Thunder held up a paw before they could speak.

“Relax,” the outcast Leader murmured. “After we find a new camp, I will come back here myself to wait for the others to return and lead them to the new camp. So until we leave, everyone just sit back and relax. And no one go *anywhere* unless I say so.”

Giving the crowd a stern look, Thunder turned and walked a few paces away. A weary sigh escaped his throat the instant he thought he was out of earshot of the outcasts and he rubbed his forehead weakly with a paw. Clearly, being the outcasts’ Leader wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

Slowly, the crowd began to break apart. Muttering spread through the camp, then broke off abruptly when a new sound split the air. Howls burst out from behind a nearby sand dune, making everyone whirl around in surprise. Saderia's fur bristled in alarm and she instantly turned toward the sound, expecting to see the entire pack racing toward the camp. To her relief, only four scrawny outcasts raced down the tall, nearby dune, their eyes wide and their breath hoarse. When the outcasts tumbled into camp, she recognized them as the canines Dingo had gone out hunting with. Only Dingo was no longer with them...

Thunder looked up sharply as the four outcasts staggered over to him, their wide eyes blazing with alarm. The Leader blinked in surprise at their stunned faces, then let out a relieved sigh. "Good. You're back. We're going to have to move to a new camp..."

"We know," one of them interrupted, his voice shaky. "We heard." The gaunt dog looked up at Thunder with wide, stunned eyes. "But you'll never believe what Dingo did!"

Thunder blinked several times, then frowned in confusion. "What'd he do?"

Another panting outcast let out a shaky breath, then quickly met his Leader's gaze with amazed brown eyes. "All of us came to the top of that sand dune back there and saw those five pack members wandering around in our camp. The pack members were just about to find you guys, Thunder. We didn't know what to do, but Dingo told us all to stay put while he ran off to the left." The outcast paused, then looked up with wide, stunned eyes. "Then he jumped to the top of another dune and howled to make all the pack members notice him! They started chasing him, but he ran and led them away from our camp!"

Thunder blinked in surprise and stared at them with eyes wide with incredulity. "Are you saying he sacrificed himself just to save us?"

All four outcasts nodded, their eyes wide with awe. Thunder stared at them in amazement for a long moment, then slowly gazed out at the desert sand dunes, his eyes wide with incredulity and awe. Following his gaze, Saderia stared at the desert, hoping to see her friend leap over a dune at any moment. Nothing happened, though. The desert was silent.

Hours passed by in tense, somber silence. Saderia sat on the outskirts of the camp, gazing out at the sand dunes with dark, shadowed amber eyes. On the horizon, the sun sank closer toward the sandy ground. Her tail flicked anxiously back and forth, but not once did she speak or make a sound. Behind her, her friends and the outcasts hung around in camp, talking quietly to their neighbors or glancing anxiously out at the sand dunes.

After hours of waiting, Dingo remained the only missing canine left unaccounted for. Every other outcast had returned over the past few hours. According to Thunder, two other outcasts were still missing, but unlike Dingo, they had been missing for several days and were assumed dead, so there was no point in waiting for them. With everyone else accounted for, the outcasts were ready to leave. If only Dingo would return...

Guilt burned in Saderia's chest at the thought of holding up the outcasts by making them wait for her friend. Anxiously, she glanced over her shoulder at the outcasts waiting in the camp. Seeing the worried, nervous expressions on their faces, she realized she wasn't making anyone do anything. The outcasts wanted Dingo to return just as much as she did.

Turning back to the desert, Saderia narrowed her eyes, determined to wait for Dingo as long as it took. Seconds later, the soft noise of thudding paw steps sounded behind her, making her look up sharply just in time to see Thunder sit down beside her. The outcast Leader rested a paw gently on her shoulder. Her heart sank when she saw the grim, serious look in his eyes.

"Saderia, we need to go, and since Dingo's not here to guide you, you need to come with us," he growled firmly. "We've been waiting for hours and he still hasn't shown up."

Saderia's eyes widened in dismay. "We can't just leave him!"

"We won't." Thunder gave her a stern gaze, his voice calm. "Like I told the others, I will come back here after we find a new camp and wait for Dingo myself."

Saderia lashed her tail distressfully. "But what if he comes back before you get a chance to return? What if he panics and ends up getting lost trying to find us? What if..."

A loud, echoing howl cut her off, making her look up in surprise. Her gaze darted to a large sand dune a few feet away and her eyes widened

in shock and disbelief. A scruffy brown figure leapt to the top of the dune and let out a bright howl. Even from a distance, Saderia could see the excitement glowing in his light brown eyes. Delight lit up her amber eyes. Letting out a cry of happiness, she raced toward Dingo just as he streamed down the dune and leapt toward the outskirts of camp. The second he skidded to a halt in front of her, she buried her muzzle in his chest.

Relief swept over her like a tidal wave as he grinned down at her. "You're back!"

Dingo grinned, his eyes glowing with mischievousness. "Of course I am. Did you ever doubt me?"

She let out a laugh as she pulled back to look at him. "No. I was just so worried. The others told us what you did." She flicked him scoldingly with her tail and shot him an accusing glare. "That was reckless and stupid, Dingo. You had us all worried."

He laughed, his eyes shining playfully. "Yeah, it probably was. But I had fun!"

Saderia rolled her eyes and gave him a warm smile. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"Thanks." Dingo grinned at her, then glanced up at the crowds of outcasts behind her, a hint of worry flickering into his eyes. "So everyone's okay, right?"

She nodded reassuringly. "We're fine. All the outcasts are safe. Thunder wants to move to a new camp, but we had to wait for you. He said we could go with them."

Dingo's eyes lit up with excitement. "Okay, that's fine." He paused, then gave her a sheepish shrug. "Sorry for holding everyone up."

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Dingo, if you hadn't done something, there might not have been any outcasts left to have a hold up."

Dingo shrugged carelessly. "Still...I should have gotten back an hour ago, but I guess I'm a little out of practice. It took me longer than I expected to lose those guys."

Saderia just shook her head and sighed. "Well, at least you're back now. Come on," she added, gesturing to the crowds of dingoes waiting behind her. "Let's go show Thunder and the others that you're alive and well, so we can get this show on the road."

Dingo grinned and nodded. "All right, let's go." Giving her a nod, he quickly fell into step beside her when she turned to lead the way back toward the outcast camp.

Side by side, they raced to the edge of the camp and paused in front of Thunder. Gasps of amazement echoed throughout the camp as the huge crowd of outcasts caught sight of Dingo. Muttering quietly to each other, the gaunt dingoes crowded around Thunder on the edge of camp to get a better look, as if stunned to see Dingo alive. Dash and Jeb darted quickly through the crowd and skidded to a halt behind Thunder, their eyes wide with surprise and relief.

Thunder gaped in incredulity as Dingo and Saderia sat back in front of him. He hesitated, then slowly stepped closer, his eyes wide with amazement. "You're...back."

Dingo gave him a bright grin. "Yep. I managed to lose those pack members a few miles that way," he replied, flicking his tail off to the left.

Thunder blinked several times and stared at him in awe. After a long moment of silence, he finally spoke up in a soft, stunned voice. "You risked your life for us?"

Dingo just shrugged and apathetically flicked his tail. "I don't know if I exactly risked my life. Those dingoes that chased me were pretty slow and not too bright."

Thunder's eyes widened and he stared at him in amazement, at a loss for words. After what felt like ages, he dipped his head low to Dingo. "Thank you. You saved all of us." He paused, then slowly looked up with eyes wide with incredulity. "I...I can't believe you would do something like that, especially for *us*. I mean, after what we did to you..."

"Thunder." Dingo held up a paw to stop him, his light brown eyes narrowing sternly. "I told you, I don't even think about that stuff anymore. That's all in the past." He paused, then gazed around at the leagues of outcasts surrounding him, all of them watching him with eyes full of awe. A faint smile crossed his face as he turned back to Thunder. "Why don't we get moving? You need to find a new camp, right?"

Thunder blinked several times, his eyes wide with astonishment. After a long hesitation, he nodded and managed a weak smile. "Right." Lifting his head, he turned to face the outcasts and raised his voice. "Everyone, grab the food! Let's get moving!"

Silver moonlight shone down on the desert, lighting up the cool sand. Stars shone in the black night sky. A soft sigh escaped Saderia's throat as she sat back on the gritty ground and gazed around at the new outcast camp. After hours of walking, Thunder had finally picked out a new area of flat land to set up camp. All around her, outcasts sank weakly to the ground, their eyes dull with exhaustion. The soft murmur of conversation floated through the dark, silent desert. A few dingoes sat together to share their last pieces of prey. Near the outskirts of camp, Dash and Jeb gazed up at the stars, nibbling on food. Dingo sat a few feet away with a crowd of outcasts, talking quietly and smiling happily.

Thunder padded tiredly through the camp, his legs shaking with weakness. Heaving a weary sigh, the outcast Leader sat down on the sandy ground just a few feet away from Saderia. The yellow brown canine looked as if he was about to collapse. Painfully, he tried to hold his head high and sit up straight, but his legs shook beneath him. His eyes clouded with exhaustion and a darker sense of hopelessness.

After hesitating, Saderia slowly rose to her paws and crept closer to the outcast Leader. "Thunder?" When he looked up at her sharply, she paused, then carefully crept closer and sat down in front of him, her amber eyes narrowed with concern. "This is no way to live. Why do you put up with this? Why don't you try to stand up to Rock?"

Thunder let out a humorless laugh. "Stand up to Rock? That's impossible. Standing up to a sandstorm would be easier." He heaved a sigh and gravely shook his head. "His dingoes are too tough. He trains them every day to be bloodthirsty, and even the scrawniest dingoes are strong. Plus, there are still more of them than us." A heavy sigh escaped his throat as he stared wistfully out at the desert. "I've thought about leading the outcasts into battle against Rock countless times, but it's hopeless. All of us will die and Rock will reign supreme. We're just too weak. There's no way we'd have any hope of winning alone. The only thing we can do now is hold on to our pathetic lives as long as we can." A shadow crept into his dead, haunted eyes. "Sometimes I wonder what the point is, though. We're never going to get our freedom back. All we're doing is waiting to die."

Saderia's heart ached. Narrowing her eyes in sympathy, she rested her tail gently on his shoulder and tried to think of something to say, but she

could think of nothing she could possibly tell him to cheer him up. What exactly could she tell a doomed animal?

“That’s what I used to think.” Saderia and Thunder looked up sharply at the sound of the soft, quiet voice. Meeting their eyes, Dingo crept closer to them, carrying a tiny piece of prey in his mouth. Dipping his head to Thunder, he leaned down and placed the food at the Leader’s feet. “Here,” he murmured, pushing it toward the ragged canine. “You haven’t eaten all day. The outcasts’ Leader should keep his strength up.”

Thunder managed a weak smile. “Thank you, but I’m not feeling very hungry.” Carefully, he pushed the prey back toward Dingo, flicking his eyes nervously back and forth as if afraid he had been overheard by others.

“Don’t worry.” Seeing his uneasy look, Dingo gave him a knowing smile. “No one but me heard what you said. I just have this problem with eavesdropping, that’s all.”

Thunder chuckled softly and shook his head in amazement. “Somehow, you always manage to make a dark situation light. How do you do that?”

Dingo shrugged carelessly. “It was either I learned how to do that or I lost my mind.”

Thunder raised an eyebrow. “I thought you did lose your mind.”

“Well...yeah, maybe towards the end. But up until that point, I managed to stay sane...well, relatively, that is.” Dingo gave him a faint grin, then studied him thoughtfully. “You know, you’ve changed since I last spoke to you in the pack. A lot.”

Thunder heaved a long sigh. “I know. I used to be just another one of Bone and Rock’s followers. Then one day I realized the dingoes I was following were really sick.” His eyes flicked up to Dingo’s face and a gleam of awe lit up their dark brown depths. “You were right, Dingo. About everything. That’s why the outcasts look up to you now.”

Dingo raised his eyebrows in surprise, his eyes clouded with disbelief. “Really?”

Thunder gave him a solemn nod. “Really. You’re like a hero to us now.”

Dingo frowned skeptically, then blinked in shock when he realized Thunder was serious. He stared at the Leader in incredulity, as if unable to believe his ears. “I am?”

A faint smile crossed Thunder's face. "Yes, you are."

Dingo blinked in shock, his eyes wide and uncomprehending. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the outcasts behind him, then looked back at Thunder with stunned brown eyes. "I...I don't know what to say. Except that I'm not a hero. I'm just an idiot who got lucky."

"I don't believe that." A grin twitched at the corners of Thunder's mouth. "After all, you always stood up for what you believed in, no matter what the consequences. Not to mention, you saved those forest animals, despite all the strife it caused you. You *are* a hero."

Dingo shrugged and uncomfortably looked away. "If you say so. I still don't believe it. I'm a martyr at best."

Thunder chuckled and slowly shook his head. "That, you are." He let out a long yawn. "Either way, you're still the only reason I've managed to lead these outcasts at all. After all...you were the only 'different' dingo I knew. It made me feel a bit better to know I wasn't alone when I broke away from the pack." He let out a weary sigh. "I realize now how hard it must have been for you to even keep breathing when you lived in the pack, but knowing that you did gives me hope that I can survive. Even if it's hard."

Dingo's light brown eyes clouded with sympathy. "It is hard. But you can't just give up. There's got to be some way to save yourselves."

Thunder just shrugged and sighed. "I sure can't think of anything. But maybe you're right. You hung in there and now you're living the high life." Another yawn escaped his throat and his eyelids drooped with exhaustion. "Anyway, it's pretty late and I know everyone's tired from moving around so much. What do you say we hit the hay?"

Dingo grinned and nodded. "Sounds good to me. See you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Dingo." Giving him a nod, Thunder turned around and slowly started to pick his way across the camp to find a suitable sleeping spot, his legs shaking.

After watching him for a long moment, Saderia took a deep breath and turned to pad back toward her friends, signaling for Dingo to follow her. Side by side, they crept across the shadowed camp, weaving in and out of groups of canines. The two paused when they reached the outskirts of camp. A faint smile crept across Saderia's face when she spotted Dash and

Jeb lying on the edge of camp and she quickly darted over to them with Dingo close behind her. Her two friends looked up at the sound of their paw steps and smiled.

“Hey,” Dash called, smiling up at Saderia and patting the empty spot beside him.

With a grateful smile, Saderia lowered herself down onto the sandy ground beside him, while Dingo laid down on the other side of Jeb. Laying together in a line, the four of them gazed out at the camp around them as they settled down to sleep.

Dingo heaved a weary sigh. “I really wish we could do something to help them.”

Saderia winced. “Me too. I’ve been trying to think of ways to help them, but I just don’t know...” She frowned curiously. “Maybe we could get them to move to the forest.”

“Uh...Saderia?” Dash frowned doubtfully. “I don’t think we have enough room for them...and the forest won’t like it either. They’ll accept one dingo, not hundreds.”

“Dash is right,” Dingo muttered, letting out a soft sigh. “Besides, I doubt any of these dingoes will want to move to the forest. It’s a pride thing.”

Jeb looked up slowly, his bicolor eyes wide with unease. “Even if these outcasts moved, wouldn’t that Rock guy just make more outcasts, too?”

Saderia sighed and put her head between her paws. “Okay, okay. You’re all right.” Her eyes gleamed with helplessness. “I just wish there was *something* we could do.”

Dingo let out a sigh and gazed absently out at the desert. “You can’t save everyone, Saderia. But who knows? Maybe you will think of something. If anyone can, it’s you.”

Golden sunshine shone down on the sizzling desert sand, warming Saderia’s dirty fur. Groggily, she raised her head and blinked against the harsh sunlight until her sleepy eyes adjusted. Stretching out her legs, she let out a long yawn and gazed around at her surroundings. All three of her friends still lay splayed out on the sand around her, fast asleep. Around camp, outcasts were slowly waking up, lifting their heads and stretching

their legs with dull, sleepy expressions. Several dingoes sat near the food pile, talking with their friends, while others paced around the camp, going about their daily activities.

No longer intimidated by the dingoes after spending so many nights with them, Saderia rose to her paws and looked around for familiar faces. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Thunder sitting near the food pile, chewing absently on a tiny morsel of prey. Catching her eye, the outcast smiled faintly and gestured for her to sit with him.

Returning the smile, Saderia padded over to him and sat back in front of the yellow brown outcast, a bright gleam in her amber eyes. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Thunder rumbled, his voice sleepy. "Did you sleep well?"

She nodded and smiled. "Yes, I slept great. Was there something you wanted?"

Thunder shrugged. "You're one of the only ones awake right now. I just thought we could talk." His eyes flicked thoughtfully to the prey in his paw. "Are you hungry?"

Saderia politely shook her head. "No thanks, I'm fine. I'll eat later."

"Suit yourself." Thunder took a bite of his prey, then gave her a curious glance. "By the way, I don't think I ever asked *why* you and your friends were out in the desert."

"Oh..." A twinge of regret swept over her and she looked away uncomfortably. "It's...because of my mother."

Thunder blinked in confusion. "Your mother?"

"She went missing," Saderia murmured, her voice soft and distant. "About a month ago. She was in really bad shape before she left. My friends and I had to leave the forest for a few weeks, but while we were gone, she ran away from the forest...Jeb's forest, that is."

Thunder tipped his head to the side. "The weird one?"

Saderia hesitated, then nodded, remembering that in dingo lingo, 'the weird one' meant Jeb's strange forest. "Yes. The rest of the forest animals and I had to live there for a while. We just recently returned to our old forest, actually. But about a week after we got home, Dingo, Dash, Jeb, and I left to go out into the desert to find my mother."

Thunder blinked sympathetically and rested his tail gently on her shoulder. "I'm sorry to hear she's missing. But...it can be really hard to find someone out here..."

"I know." Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But I think we can find her if we really try. Once we leave your camp, we'll start looking for her again."

"All right." He frowned curiously. "Does, er, your father know you're out here?"

Saderia frowned at his bewildered tone, then realized why he sounded so confused. Most dingoes rarely had any relationship at all with their parents, so to Thunder, it must seem odd that she did. Heaving a sigh, she shook her head. "No. I had to leave without telling him, but I think he knows...I hope it hasn't hurt him too much."

Thunder's eyes clouded with sympathy, but he studied her curiously, a wondering gleam in his dark brown irises. "Does your pack know you're out here looking for your mother?"

"We call it a kingdom," she explained. "But yes, I'm sure they know. My parents are the King and Queen of the forest, so everyone probably knows we're gone by now."

Thunder blinked in misunderstanding. "Are Kings and Queens like Leaders?"

Saderia nodded and smiled faintly. "Yes, the King and Queen—my parents—rule the forest. I'm next in line to rule, so in a way, I'm kind of like a Second in Command."

"Wow..." Thunder's eyes widened in shock and incredulity. "I...I didn't know you were so important in your forest..."

Discomfort crept into her gaze, but she simply shrugged. She didn't like to be thought of as important and she didn't want to make Thunder feel uncomfortable around her.

Blinking in amazement, Thunder looked up sharply and spotted Dingo standing a few feet away, stretching his legs and looking around groggily. Awe flickered across Thunder's face. "Hey!" he called. "You didn't tell me your forest food was royalty!"

Dingo looked up in surprise, then grinned. "Oh, she told you that, huh?"

“Yeah!” Thunder shook his head and raised an eyebrow. “Looks like you picked the right forest food to obsess over!”

Dingo chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I guess you’re right!”

A grin spread across Thunder’s face, but when he turned back to Saderia, the smile faded into a more thoughtful, wondering expression. Before Saderia could ask what was on his mind, he briskly rose to his paws and looked sharply around at the camp, his eyes narrowing. “Excuse me, Saderia. I need to go talk to Brawny for a second.”

Saderia blinked in surprise, then just shrugged and stepped back as he stalked hastily away from her. Moving quickly, Thunder strode across the camp and quickly sat down next to his burly Second in Command, who sat several feet away near the outskirts of camp. When Brawny looked up curiously, Thunder leaned closer to him and murmured something in a voice too quiet for Saderia to hear.

Confusion shone in her amber eyes, but after a moment of hesitation, she merely shrugged and turned around to find her friends. Shaking her head at Thunder’s odd behavior, she bounded toward the edge of camp where her friends had fallen asleep. Dingo had already risen to his paws and bounded off toward a group of friends. Stretching his paws and blinking sleep out of his eyes in the place he had fallen asleep, Jeb looked up and waved to her as she crept closer. To her surprise, he turned and instantly padded off toward a crowd of dingoes to chat with them. Only Dash remained in the place where they had spent the night, still deeply asleep.

Bewilderment crept into her amber eyes. Why was Dash sleeping in so much lately? Rolling her eyes, she just sighed and leaned down to shake his shoulder to wake him up. Only after shaking him and calling his name several times did his eyes finally flutter open.

Letting out a long, sleepy yawn, Dash groggily lifted his head. Confusion clouded his eyes until he weakly shook himself and blinked out of his daze. “Good morning...”

“Good morning.” Saderia paused, then tipped her head to the side and frowned in confusion. “Are you okay? You’ve been sleeping awfully late these past few days.”

Dash winced and suppressed a low groan. “Sorry. I guess I’m just not sleeping well or something.” That was an understatement. Last night, he

had spent the entire meeting fighting with Dastarius. Somehow, even in the dream world, facing his father had been exhausting. On the upside, though, he was getting much better at fighting. Soon, he wouldn't even need Dastarius to teach him. The thought brought a faint smile to his face.

"I noticed." Saderia raised an eyebrow and flicked him sharply with her tail. "You look rough."

Dash let out an annoyed sigh and looked away. "I guess the ground's just hard to sleep on," he growled, wishing she would get off his case. He could sleep in if he wanted.

Saderia frowned in confusion at his testy tone, then just shrugged. "Okay. You just always seem so tired lately. I just wondered if something was bothering you."

Suppressing the urge to roll his eyes, Dash shook his head. "Nope. Nothing."

"Okay..." Saderia eyed him curiously, then just shook her head and let it go. Before she could say anything else, the sound of paw steps behind her made her look up in surprise.

Dingo padded over to them, flicking his tail and raising an eyebrow when he spotted Dash. "Is he finally up? Jeez, Dash, what's your problem?"

Dash flattened his ears. "I'm *sorry*. I'm just tired. Is that so horrible?" he growled, unable to keep the hostility out of his voice. Really, was sleeping in such a crime?

"Whatever." Dingo merely flicked his tail, not noticing the harsh tone in his voice. An eager, hopeful smile crept across his face when he turned to Saderia. "Hey, can I go out hunting again? I promise I won't do anything stupid this time."

Saderia just rolled her eyes and tried to hide a smile. "Yes, Dingo, you're free to go hunting if you want. But no heroics this time."

"Whatever you say, Mommy," Dingo replied, rolling his eyes sarcastically but giving her a grateful smile nonetheless. Flicking her playfully with his tail, he turned and bounded back through the camp in the direction of a small, mangy crowd of dingoes. His light brown eyes shone in the morning light.

"What's wrong with him?" The soft, curious voice made Saderia and Dash turn around in surprise to see Jeb trotting toward them. The

creature frowned and paused when he stood in front of them, his eyes puzzled. "Why does Dash look half-asleep?"

Dash lashed his tail and let out an aggravated hiss. "What's with you guys? Jeez, can't a guy be tired around here without everyone questioning him left and right?"

Jeb's eyes widened in alarm. Nervously, he took a step back. "Er... sorry..."

Saderia blinked in surprise, then narrowed her eyes and gave Dash a cold, stern look. "It's okay, Jeb. Dash is just irritable because it's hot." Ignoring Dash's annoyed glare, she flicked her tail and glanced at the small kraguer. "Anyway, what do you need, Jeb?"

Jeb blinked, then shrugged and gestured to the dingoes he had been talking to. "Those guys wanted to know how long we're going to stay. I said I would ask you."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "Tell them I'm not sure yet, but that we plan to stay for at least one or two more days, if not more."

"Okay, thanks." Jeb gave her a faint smile, then turned around to bound back toward the dingoes, giving Dash one quick, curious glance before he left.

As soon as he raced away to rejoin his canine friends, Saderia turned and gave Dash a long, stern look, her eyes not amused.

Dash let out a heavy sigh and glanced uncomfortably at the ground. "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to yell at Jeb. I guess I am just a little irritable."

Saderia let out a soft breath, flicking him playfully with her tail. "It's okay. If you want, you can sleep in longer. I'm just going to talk to the dingoes and do the usual stuff."

"No, that's okay." Dash managed a weak smile and shook out his unruly dark brown mane, trying to wake himself up. "I'll go talk to them, too."

Saderia smiled and nodded as Dash rose to his paws and turned to look out at the camp. Shaking himself, he took a deep breath, then padded into camp, searching for familiar faces. After watching him for a long moment, Saderia slowly turned and started to make her way through the camp, weaving around crowds of skinny outcasts and calling hello to a few that waved at her. Her eyes flicked across the crowded camp, glancing

curiously at the outcasts around her. A familiar, high-pitched voice sounded above the soft murmur of the crowd as she walked, making her ears prick up in surprise.

A few paces away from her, Bunny sat close beside her older brother, Lightning, sharing a tiny piece of prey. The pitch black pup absently looked up at her brother, her expression calm and unbothered and her tone light. "A pack member saw us, you know."

Alarm shot through Saderia at Bunny's words. A pack member? Had Bunny seen someone watching them?

Lightning looked up sharply, his yellow eyes wide with fear. "*What?* You saw someone?"

Bunny calmly shook her head. "No, I didn't *see* anyone. But I *know* that when we left the old camp and came here, a pack member saw us."

Lightning blinked in surprise, then let out a soft sigh. "But you didn't actually see anyone?"

Bunny flattened her ears, her eyes gleaming with annoyance. "No, but I *told* you. Someone saw us. I know it." Her eyes narrowed. "Aren't you going to tell Thunder?"

Lightning let out a relieved sigh and gave her a weak smile, resting his tail gently on her shoulder. "Bunny, you probably just think you saw something."

Her fur bristled. "But I didn't *see* anything..."

"Then there's nothing to report." Lightning gave her a sympathetic smile. "I know what happened yesterday was scary, Bunny, so you're probably just a little scared now..."

"I'm not *scared*!" Bunny hissed, lashing her tail in fury. "Of anything!"

A faint smile crossed Lightning's face and he chuckled softly. "Of course not, Bunny. Still, it's normal to be a little paranoid after an attack."

Fury blazed in Bunny's amber eyes and she gritted her teeth, then simply straightened up and narrowed her eyes. "Fine then. Don't report it to Thunder." She paused, then coolly met her brother's gaze, her amber eyes flashing and her voice low. "But you'll be sorry."

Lightning blinked in surprise, his yellow eyes clouding with bewilderment at the creepy tone in her voice. Bunny glared at him for a long moment, then simply turned and stalked away, her expression as calm

and unfazed as ever. For a long moment, Lightning stared after his sister in shock, then simply shook his head and turned to walk away, rolling his eyes.

Shock shone in Saderia's eyes. Something about that pup had seemed odd since the day she had met her...Frowning, she watched her closely. Her eyes followed the tiny black pup as she padded across the camp. After walking a few paces, Bunny paused, then slowly turned and looked right at her. Their amber eyes locked. A smirk crept across Bunny's face. Shaking her head, she stalked away, snickering to herself the whole time. Saderia raised an eyebrow, then slowly turned to walk away, trying to shake off an eerie feeling. Still, an odd sense of disquiet lingered in her heart until night fell.

"A pack member saw us..." Bunny's eerie words rang in Saderia's ears, making her eyes flutter open into a void of pure darkness. Even in the shadows, she could hear the smirk in the young pup's voice. Screams suddenly burst out from all directions, raising the fur along Saderia's spine. Howls, snarls, shrieks, and wails rose up from the darkness all around her, echoing in her ears and growing louder and louder each second. Her heart skipped a beat and her eyes widened in horror. What was going on?

A flash of silver moonlight suddenly sliced through the darkness, shattering the shadows around her. Shrieks and snarls screamed in Saderia's ears and a wave of heat crashed over her like a wave. Gritty sand dunes took shape out of the darkness of the night. All around her, shadowy figures clashed, letting out howls and screams in the frigid air of the night. Shadows lurched across the sandy ground in one dark, indistinguishable mess. The salty scent of blood rose thickly in the air and scarlet liquid splattered the ground.

Fear rose in Saderia's chest as dark figures tumbled past her, locked in deadly battles. Shrieks erupted from all directions, splitting her eardrums. A terrified howl rose up over the screams of battle, sending a shiver down her spine. "We have to get out of here!"

A hazy, indistinct yellow brown figure leapt out from the shadows in front of her. "Run! Get out of here and don't come back! You don't have to die like us!"

Horror gleamed in Saderia's eyes. Before she realized what was happening, her paws were moving frantically. Screaming shadow figures flew past her on either side, lashing out at her as she ran and swinging at other shadows. Everything around her was nothing but a blur of darkness, heat, and blood, making it impossible to see. Out of nowhere, her heart skipped and a wave of pain and horror washed over her, nearly strong enough to send her stumbling to the ground. A scream tore out of her throat. "Dash!"

Darkness swept over her in an instant, whisking the scene away in a swirl of shadows. Just as Saderia's eyes started to flutter open, an ear-shattering scream tore through her Dream and echoed in the cold air of the night.

"We're being invaded!"

Chapter Nineteen

Invasion

“Saderia! Wake up! Hurry!” A paw jabbed roughly into Saderia’s side, making her eyes fly open in shock. Letting out a shaky gasp, she stumbled wildly to her paws, her eyes wide with alarm. Darkness and shadows seemed to writhe all around her. Whirling around, she froze when she found herself staring into the shadowed dark brown face of Dash, his expression stricken and his eyes wide with horror. She tried to ask what was going on, but her voice cut off abruptly. An earsplitting howl split the air, ringing painfully in her ears and raising all the fur on her back. Deafening screams rose in the dark night air, making her heart skip a beat.

Blinking rapidly, she whipped around to face the outcast camp around her and gasped in horror. Hundreds of shadowy dogs covered the land, making it impossible to see the ground. Shadows clashed all across the dark land with deafening crashes, stumbling across the sand in a deadly, vicious dance of claws and fangs. Screams erupted from every inch of the camp, filling the tense air with a wild, eerie cacophony. Huge canines poured over the surrounding sand dunes and thundered into camp, leaping at gaunt outcasts with bloodthirsty snarls. Outcasts fled in all directions, screaming and stumbling in their desperation to get away. Stronger canines tackled the fleeing outcasts, chuckling at their weak screams. Desperately, the outcasts lunged toward the stronger dingoes with harsh shrieks, struggling in vain to run them out. The salty, metallic tang of blood rose in the air, raising all the fur on Saderia’s back.

Her mouth gaped open in horror. Carnage swam before her eyes, making her heart hammer wildly in her chest. Her Dream had come true... Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a yellow brown figure weaving frantically through the shadows, dodging attacks. Opening his mouth, the skinny outcast started to shout a command, but the words never left his throat. A huge canine lunged at him from the side, sending him tumbling

helplessly to the ground. With a triumphant snarl, the dog pinned him down and drove his fangs into Thunder's neck.

A scream tore out of Saderia's throat. Desperate to help, she lunged toward him, but never got a chance. A feral snarl erupted behind her, making her whip around just in time to see Dingo lunge past her and slam into the canine pinning Thunder. The dog let out a yelp of surprise as they tumbled to the ground, away from Thunder. Not giving him time to fight, Dingo leapt to his paws and smacked the enemy's face, snapping his head back. The canine's pained howl rose in the air, but Dingo ignored it. Leaving him behind, Dingo raced to Thunder's side and leaned down to help the shaky Leader to his paws.

Saderia's eyes widened in hope and she desperately started toward them, then froze when a paw landed roughly on her shoulder. Letting out a gasp of alarm, she whipped around and froze when she saw Dash staring back at her. The dark lion narrowed his eyes sternly, his amber irises glowing with fear. "Saderia, we have to get out of here!"

Saderia blinked several times, then nodded shakily. "Right." She let her eyes flick to the ground where her friends had fallen asleep, expecting to see Jeb laying on the sand. Fear washed over her when she realized he wasn't there. Wildly, she whipped around and gazed out at the dark battlefield, her heart skipping. "Where's Jeb?"

Dash glanced at the ground, then looked up with eyes wide with disbelief. "He was right there!"

Saderia's eyes widened in dismay. Desperately, she gazed out at the battling shadows, searching for Jeb. Terror gleamed in her amber eyes, but before she could think of what to do, a high, terrified cry rose up from the screams of the battlefield. "*Help!*"

Her eyes grew wide with shock. "Jeb!" Whipping around, she let out a gasp when she spotted the tiny creature racing desperately toward her, his yellow fur bristling and his blue and green eyes wide with terror. A huge canine with bared fangs and a bloodthirsty grin thundered after him.

Saderia's heart skipped. Unsheathing her claws, she started toward him, but Dash moved faster. With a dangerous snarl, he lunged toward the canine, his claws glinting in the moonlight. The dingo looked up sharply, but before he could react, Dash soared over Jeb and slammed into the dog, digging his claws deep into his shoulders. A painful howl tore out of the

dingo's throat as the two of them collapsed to the ground. Snarling furiously, the dingo kicked Dash in the stomach and sent him tumbling back across the sand. Instantly, Dash leapt to his paws and lunged toward him with a hiss, ignoring the blood dripping from his stomach.

Jeb's eyes widened in horror. Letting out a gasp, he whipped around and raced toward Saderia as fast as his short legs could carry him. With a soft whimper, he dove beneath her and hid behind her front legs. Saderia's eyes flicked toward him, then instantly snapped up to the fight, glowing with fear. Could Dash fight this dingo alone?

A vicious snarl tore out of the bloody dog's throat. Baring his fangs, he jumped back on his hind paws seconds before Dash lunged toward him and caught the lion in midair. Twisting quickly, the dog swung him around and threw him to the sand. Dash's back hit the ground with a harsh thud and he winced a second too long. Before he could jump to his paws, the canine crashed down on him and pinned him to the ground, his claws digging deep into his paws. A bloodthirsty sneer crossed his face.

Saderia's heart stopped, but Dash barely even blinked. Narrowing his eyes, he kicked up and shoved the dog away with a strength she didn't know he had. Before the dingo could react, Dash slammed his back paws into his belly and threw him away. A painful howl tore out of the dingo's throat as he smacked the ground. Without hesitating, Dash leapt to his paws, then lunged at the dog, a feral gleam in his eyes. His claws dug into his shoulders and he didn't wince when the canine howled in pain.

Saderia's eyes widened in shock, but something past Dash caught her eye, making her look up sharply. Alarm shone in her amber irises when she spotted two burly dingoes charging toward Dash and the wounded canine with furious snarls. "Dash, look out!" she screamed.

Dash's ears pricked and his eyes flicked to the side, but he never tore his gaze off his victim. Flattening his ears, he raked his claws across the canine's belly, then jumped away just as his attackers leapt toward him. Weaving away from their attacks, he raced toward Saderia and Jeb and followed when she whipped around to lead them away.

Weaving wildly through crowds of blood-spattered canines and wincing at the howls that haunted the clearing, Saderia skidded to a halt when they lost their attackers behind a swirl of shadows. Her eyes darted to

the spot where she had seen Dingo helping Thunder and her heart skipped when she realized both canines were no longer there.

“Dingo!” Wildly, she whipped around and scanned the darkness for any sign of her friend. A shiver raced down her spine at the sight of the battle around her. Strong dingoes poured into the camp, letting out wild howls of sick delight. More and more streamed down the dunes, invading the camp from every direction. The powerful dogs thundered through the shadowy camp, sweeping scrawny outcasts off their paws with one brutal swipe. Blood glistened on their fangs. Outcasts raced wildly across the sand, their eyes wide with fear. Blood drenched their scruffy, tattered fur.

In vain, some outcasts lashed out at the invaders, struggling to defend themselves. Blood splattered the sand as the pack members swept through them with barely any effort at all. Outcasts were thrown to the ground with terrified howls that abruptly cut off. Several scrawny outcasts lay limply on the blood-streaked sand. Others flew past her on all sides, fleeing frantically. Canines charged after them with cruel howls, tackling them or hunting them down. Agonized howls reigned in the dark, bloody camp.

Horror gleamed in Saderia’s wide eyes as she stared at the battle. Every inch of her longed to help the outcasts, but she didn’t see how she could. Tough, burly canines swarmed the camp, a hundred or more to Saderia’s three friends and a pack of starved outcasts. Fury burned in her chest. Such cowards... Nonetheless, she and her friends didn’t stand a chance against so many strong canines...But did Dingo realize that? Dread gleamed in her eyes and her heart skipped a beat. What if Dingo tried to help the outcasts—by going up against an entire pack of strong canines? What if he got hurt? What if he was *killed*?

Panic swam in her eyes and she wildly scanned the battlefield. No matter where she looked, though, she couldn’t see her scruffy friend through the hordes of fighting canines.

Beside her, Jeb shivered, his eyes wide with fear. “What...What’s happening?”

“We’ve been invaded.”

Saderia’s eyes widened at the sound of the low, dark growl. Whirling around, she looked back to see who had spoken and gasped in shock.

A tiny black pup sat a few paces away, her tail curled neatly over her paws. Blood drenched her small feet and speckled her dark fur. A scar cut across her black muzzle, dripping blood. Not a single trace of distress crossed her face as the battle raged around her. The pup's cold, malevolent eyes glowed through the shadows and bored into Saderia's, their amber depths cool and knowing. "By pack members," she hissed, her voice barely a whisper.

Saderia's breath caught in her throat. Bunny had known this would happen...

Her mouth gaped open, but no words came out. Bunny raised an eyebrow and steadily met her gaze, as if silently saying 'I told you so.' Saderia's heart pounded wildly, though whether it was from the intensity of the battle or the eeriness of Bunny's gaze, she didn't know. The pup stared at her intently, seeming not to notice the screams echoing around her. After a long silence, she lifted a bloody paw and gestured carelessly to the left. "He's over there."

Saderia blinked in confusion, then felt her eyes widen in shock. "Dingo!" Surprise shone in her eyes as she stared at the pup. She knew they were looking for him?

The pup nodded and dropped her paw, a grave, dangerous shadow flitting across her face. "Take him and go. Unless you want to die, too."

Guilt and horror blazed in Saderia's chest as she stared at the grim expression on Bunny's face. If she left now, she *would* be leaving the outcasts to die. Even the pup seemed to know her own mortality was near. How could she leave them behind? Then again, what good would staying do? Bunny was right. If she stayed, she would only die with them...

Bunny's eyes narrowed and her voice dropped to a harsh growl. "Now. You need to get away." Her eyes flashed in the dim light. "Are you going to listen to me now?"

Saderia blinked several times and tried to speak, but no words came out. Shakily, she stared at the pup, her eyes wide with indecision. Bunny merely raised an eyebrow, a challenging gleam in her eyes. Flicking her tail, she cast a calm, unbothered glance over her shoulder. Looking back, she steadily met Saderia's gaze one last time, her amber eyes cool and dark. In one swift, sudden movement, she leapt to her paws and lunged to the side.

A second later, a brawny pack member slammed onto the ground in the spot where she had sat just seconds before.

A shriek of alarm tore out of Saderia's throat, but when she spotted Bunny, the pup seemed as calm as ever. Barely sparing a glance at the pack member, she darted into a dark shadow and vanished, as if her pitch black fur was part of the shadow itself. Unseen, she swept away from the dingo without a word and disappeared into the fray. Saderia's mouth gaped open in shock while the dingo growled and charged vainly into the battle, lashing his tail in frustration.

Gaping in incredulity, Saderia staggered after them, wanting to protect Bunny, but a heavy paw grabbed her shoulder before she could move. Letting out a gasp, she spun around and froze when she saw Dash standing behind her, his expression grave but stern. "Saderia, we have to go," he hissed, his tail lashing frantically. "We have to go *now*."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror and she started to protest, but the words died away when she saw Dash's desperate look. Biting her lip, she glanced back at the place where Bunny had disappeared, then took a deep breath and nodded weakly. When Dash turned and raced off in the direction Bunny had indicated, Saderia charged after him with Jeb close beside her, trying to block out the grief in her heart. An image of Bunny's dark, creepy face lingered in her mind. Gritting her teeth, she weaved wildly through the battle, throwing up clumps of sand behind her in her haste to get away.

"Look out!" Dash's sudden shout tore her out of her thoughts. Looking up, she let out a hiss of alarm when a pack member lunged toward them, his fangs bared in a bloodthirsty snarl. Dodging wildly to the side, she pushed Jeb out of the way just in time. Claws caught her shoulder as the dingo soared past her, ripping open a deep gash.

Snarling furiously, the dingo landed heavily on his paws and whirled around to face them, a cruel gleam in his eyes. Just as he turned, Dash lunged toward him and raked his claws across the canine's eyes. When the dingo jerked back with a howl of pain, Saderia and Jeb raced away as fast as they could. Behind them, Dash whipped around and leapt after them until he raced in front of them, leading the way through the fray of blood and battles. Fire burned in his amber eyes and his fur bristled with exhilaration. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, Saderia realized he hadn't wanted to run away. He had wanted to fight.

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she looked around wildly for any sign of Dingo, her mind buzzing with fear. What if Bunny had sent them the wrong way? What if they were just getting farther away from him? What if Dingo was hurt, bleeding, alone? What if he was already dead? Horror swept over her like a wave. Losing Dingo once had been bad enough. She couldn't lose him again. Not like this...

"There he is!" Dash's loud voice tore her out of her thoughts. Sharply, she looked up and gasped when she caught sight of Dingo just ahead. Her skinny friend fought viciously alongside an outcast, facing two thick pack members. Blood coated his shaggy brown fur and wounds lined his sides, but his light brown eyes blazed with fury and fire.

"Dingo!" she shouted, racing toward him and trying not to shiver when her paws splashed through puddles of blood. Dash and Jeb bounded after her and skidded to a halt when she froze just a few paces away from her friend. "Dingo!" she screamed, struggling to be heard over the earsplitting howls and shrieks echoing around the desert. "Dingo!"

Dingo's eyes flicked to her face and relief gleamed in their light brown depths, but he didn't turn away from his fight. A low growl of satisfaction escaped his throat when one of his enemies fled.

Panic burned in Saderia's eyes. "Dingo, we have to go!" she shouted.

"No!" Dingo shook his head furiously, his eyes blazing as he faced the last enemy. "I can't go! Not now!"

Dismay swept over her. "Dingo, *please!* We can't help them! We have to leave!"

Dingo just shook his head and turned away, a low growl rumbling in his throat. Fearful tears pricked Saderia's eyes and she opened her mouth to speak, but broke off abruptly when a harsh sound rose over the din of the battle. A bloodcurdling scream split the air, raising all the fur on her back and turning her blood to ice. Whipping around, she felt a scream rise in her throat when she saw an outcast collapse behind her, his neck drenched in blood. A pack member loomed over him with a cruel sneer. Glancing up, he spotted Saderia and snickered. Baring his fangs, he lunged toward her, his claws outstretched.

Fear gleamed in Saderia's eyes, but she unsheathed her claws in determination. Lashing her tail, she raced toward him to fight back, but

Dash got there first. Lunging into the air, he flew toward the dingo, his claws meeting his shoulders. Before he could tackle him to the ground, the dog jerked to the side and sent him flying away. Saderia's heart lurched, but before she could defend her friend, Dash twisted in midair and landed perfectly on his feet, already facing the dingo and lashing his tail in fury. Baring his fangs, he lunged toward the dog, letting out a vicious snarl Saderia had never heard before.

Dash smacked into the canine and sent them both collapsing to the ground. Low, furious snarls erupted from the two of them as they rolled across the sand, clawing viciously at each other. Sinking his fangs deep into his enemy's shoulder, Dash raked his claws across his belly as hard as he could. A pained howl tore out of the pack member's throat. Gritting his teeth, he kicked out roughly and shoved Dash away. Staggering to his paws, the dog lashed out and dug a deep gash across Dash's shoulder the instant the lion started to get up.

Wincing, Dash nearly stumbled to the sand. Sensing weakness, the dog whipped his claws across his face, leaving long, bloody marks. Hissing furiously, Dash staggered away, his eyes blazing with anger. The second the dingo lashed out at him, Dash smacked his paw away. With a furious snarl, he raked his claws across the dog's face, making him jerk back with a yelp of surprise. Not letting up, Dash lashed out again and again, scoring gashes across his shoulders and chest. Hissing, he slammed his claws into the side of the dingo's face, making his head snap back. A loud howl tore out of the dingo's throat. Dripping with blood, the canine whipped around and raced away as fast as he could.

A low growl rumbled in Dash's throat. Instantly, he made a move to race after the dingo, but Saderia caught his shoulder to stop him. Her eyes widened in shock at the eerie look on his face. With fire burning in his amber eyes and a feral snarl rumbling in his throat, Dash seemed ready to chase after the dingo and kill him with his own paws...

Blinking rapidly, Saderia stared at him for a long moment, then looked back when a sharp howl sounded behind her. A pack member raced away from the battlefield after a sharp swipe from Dingo, howling and trailing blood. Narrowing his eyes, Dingo watched the pack member flee, then slowly looked up and met Saderia's gaze, his brown eyes guarded.

A pleading look crept into Saderia's eyes. "Dingo, you've got to come with us!" she cried. "The pack members will recognize you! You're public enemy number one! They're going to do everything they can to rip you to shreds once they realize who you are!" Tears swam before her eyes, blurring her vision. "You could die!"

Dingo's gaze hardened and he met her eyes unwaveringly. "I don't care. I don't care if I die. I'll die with honor, helping my pack mates."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. "But it won't do any good! There are too many pack members here and you know it! There's nothing we can do here!"

Pain gleamed in his light brown eyes and he swiftly looked away. Deep down, he probably already knew that. Gritting his teeth, Dingo flattened his ears and gazed painfully out at the bloodbath around him. An ear piercing scream split the air as another outcast collapsed to the ground. Dingo winced and closed his eyes, an agonized expression on his face. Looking up at Saderia with pained brown eyes, he opened his mouth to protest, but before he could speak, a familiar yellow brown figure stumbled out of a crowd of fighting dingoes behind them. Half-staggering, the skeletal canine lunged into the space between them, his dark brown eyes gleaming with determination.

"Saderia's right," Thunder choked out, blood spilling out of his mouth. His scarred, gaunt sides heaved with pants and his yellow brown fur was drenched with blood, but he held Dingo's gaze sternly. His voice grew firmer as he gazed at him and his friends. "Run. Get out of here and don't come back!" His eyes blazed in the darkness. "You don't have to die like us!"

Anguish burned in Dingo's eyes and he hesitated before slowly looking back at Saderia, his face twisted with pain and indecision.

Saderia firmly narrowed her eyes. "We have to go. We need you, Dingo."

Pain gleamed in his brown irises, but after a long hesitation, Dingo closed his eyes and gave her a curt, pained nod. Casting one last glance at Thunder, he forced himself to move toward them. The instant he reached them, Saderia whipped around and raced away with her friends hurrying to keep up with her. Gritting his teeth, Dingo forced himself to race after her and leapt past her to lead them through the battlefield, his tail flicking with

distress. Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced back at Thunder and winced. Fear flashed in the outcast's dark brown eyes a second before darkness swallowed him up and swept him out of view.

Biting her lip, Saderia forced herself to keep moving, her muscles burning with pain and her heart screaming in protest. In the back of her mind, she knew this was a hopeless battle that she could never win, but her heart couldn't believe it. Ahead of her, Dingo narrowed his eyes to hide the pain in his brown irises. Screams echoed around them, making them wince. Trying desperately to shake the guilt out of her mind, Saderia wove through crowds of fighting dogs, ducking away from bloody, slashing paws.

Ahead, Dingo took a sharp turn around a thick group of fighting canines. The edge of the battlefield loomed just a few feet away. Even though the scent of blood still lingered, the fighting had thinned out near the outskirts of camp. Just past the bloody edges of camp, tall dunes rose up, promising a way out of the bloodbath. Hope surged in Saderia's chest as she raced toward the outskirts of the battlefield. Just a little farther, and they would be safe...

A low, dangerous snarl suddenly erupted behind them. "Get them! Don't let them escape! Kill all of them!" The cold, gruff voice let out a bloodthirsty chuckle and growled. "Except for the dingo! Leave him to me!"

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. The eerie voice was talking about them!

A shadow crossed Dingo's face and a dark growl rumbled in his throat. "Rock."

Terror flashed in Saderia's eyes. The pack *Leader* was there, too? And he had recognized Dingo? A shiver raced down her spine. Willing herself to run faster, she bolted across the bloody sand, desperate to get away. Screams followed them with every step. The camp outskirts loomed in front of them, just out of reach. Hope kindled in her chest, but before they could reach the outskirts, five husky dingoes leapt out in front of them from either side and blocked their way, their eyes gleaming with bloodlust and their fangs bared. With a tense growl, Dingo veered to avoid them, leading his friends to the right. The five canines charged after them, hard on their heels.

Panting heavily, Dingo glanced back over his shoulder as the four of them weaved through the fight. His eyes blazed with fury and determination. "I can take these guys..."

Saderia glared at him as she panted and fought to keep up. "Don't you dare!"

His tail lashed with anger. "I can't just let them get away with this!"

Saderia let out a furious hiss and fiercely narrowed her eyes. "Let it go!"

Dingo let out an infuriated snarl, then hastily turned to lead the way. To her relief, he didn't look back to challenge the canines. Behind them, the dogs thundered after them, letting out cruel, jeering howls. More pack members fell into step with them as they flew past crowds of battling canines. Saderia's heart skipped with fear as her paws pounded the ground. Shadowy figures swirled past her on either side and howls boomed in her ears. Somehow, there had to be another way out, but where? Where did the bloodbath end?

Before she could hope for freedom, a large canine leapt out from the side, baring his fangs and letting out a loud howl. A screech tore out of Saderia's throat and she skidded to an abrupt halt with Dash right beside her. In front of her, Dingo grabbed Jeb and pulled him away just before the pack member could attack. The snarling dog landed right in between the group of friends and instantly whipped around to face Saderia and Dash. Letting out a snarl, he lunged at her, baring his fangs and chuckling with triumph.

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm. In the split-second before the pack member slammed into her, Dash leapt into the air and tackled him to the ground. With a snarl, the dog crashed to the sand, digging his claws into Dash's shoulders. Both hit the ground with a sharp smack. Hissing viciously, Dash clawed at the enemy as they rolled across the sand, struggling to get the upper hand. Panic gleamed in Saderia's eyes and she raced toward Dash to help, but a loud howl behind her made her freeze. Before she could move, a heavy figure slammed into her from behind, sending her sprawling to the ground with a stunned shriek. Frantically, she rolled around and tried to push herself up, but heavy paws slammed down on her shoulders. A pack member loomed over her, sneering down at her with fangs dripping with blood.

A hiss escaped her throat. Narrowing her eyes, she spat in his face and wrenched one of her legs free to smack him across his muzzle. The pack member recoiled in pain and she tried to wriggle away, but her paws couldn't move fast enough. With a furious growl, the dingo slammed her back against the ground, his claws digging viciously into her shoulders. His eyes blazed in the dim light, livid with fury. Baring his fangs, he lunged toward her throat with a vicious snarl.

Just as his fangs met her neck, a loud, furious snarl split the air. "Get away from her!" The dingo's fangs were ripped away from her neck in one sharp snap. With a loud yelp of surprise, the dingo stumbled away. Blinking in shock, Saderia scrambled to her paws and looked up just in time to see Dingo lunge at the pack member, his eyes blazing with rage. Fangs tore into each other's shoulders and claws gouged each other's sides. Neither hesitated before lashing out at the other, their movements almost a blur. Hatred burned in Dingo's eyes and a furious snarl rumbled in his throat. Saderia's desert friend had been looking for a reason to tear into one of the pack members. Now he had one.

Her eyes frantically sought out Dash in the blur of blood and darkness as Dingo shoved the pack member to the ground. In a split second, she caught a glimpse of him through the shadows. A savage glint lit up his amber eyes. With a furious snarl, he threw his enemy to the side, ignoring his strangled yelp. Seconds later, he vanished into the blood-tainted darkness. Behind him, a high, terrified cry rang out over the battle howls. "*Help!*"

Instantly, Saderia whipped around and let out a gasp. Jeb raced across the sandy ground, his eyes wild with terror. Behind him, a dingo gave chase, a hungry sneer on his face. Fury blazed in Saderia's chest. Bunching her muscles, she lunged at the dingo and landed roughly on his back, taking him by surprise. A loud yelp escaped his throat when she dug her claws into his shoulders. Rearing back violently, the dingo snarled and threw her off. A gasp tore out of her throat and her breath left her chest when she smacked the ground.

The dingo loomed over her, an enraged growl rumbling in his throat and his bloody fangs bared in fury. Cold fear swept over Saderia, but a hotter blaze of determination burned in her chest. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to her paws, her eyes blazing with fury. She was sick of

hiding behind her friends. It was time for her to fight. Surprise shone in the dingo's eyes, but it disappeared in a look of rage when her claws struck his face. Snarling, he lashed out and caught her shoulder. Saderia winced and staggered back, but didn't stop. When the dingo started toward her, she ripped her claws across his face.

A low growl rose in the pack member's throat. Ducking under a sharp swipe, he knocked her paws out from under her and rammed his paw into her chest to flip her over. A shriek escaped her throat when she collapsed on her back, but she ignored the pain that shot up her spine. Growling in triumph, the dingo lunged toward her to pin her down, but she instantly kicked up her back legs and struck him in the chest, sending him flying backward with a howl of alarm. Frantically, she scrambled to her paws, while the dingo landed on his belly with a painful smack. Not wasting a second, Saderia staggered toward him and slammed her paw down on the back of his neck when he tried to get up. The dingo froze beneath her.

Leaning down, Saderia glared and hissed through gritted teeth. "The minute I let you up, you're going to run and never hurt my friends ever again. Do you understand?"

Surprise glimmered in the dingo's eyes a second before a sneer crossed his face. "What's the matter? Is the forest food too scared to kill me?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not a murderer."

The dingo chuckled coldly and smirked. "What? You mean like your little 'friend' over there?" Flicking his tail, he gestured toward Dingo, who turned to chase after the other pack member when the enemy turned and fled, dripping with blood.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia dug her claws in deeper. "Don't push me."

Alarm shone in the canine's eyes, but Saderia let him up. Hissing, she slapped his face with her claws and gritted her teeth when the dingo yelped. Staggering to his paws, the dog whipped around and raced away as fast as he could.

Letting out a shaky breath, Saderia swung around to find her friends and nearly jumped when she saw Jeb standing behind her. The tiny creature

stared up at her with eyes wide with shock and admiration. “Are...Are you okay?”

Saderia nodded absently, then turned to gaze out at the battlefield, searching for her friends. Her heart sank when she realized she could no longer see Dash or Dingo.

Paw steps suddenly sounded behind her, raising the fur on her back. Whirling around, she let out a defensive growl, then broke off when she realized it was only Dingo. Relief shone in her eyes as the canine trotted up to her, but at the same time, a wave of fear crashed over her. Blood soaked Dingo’s shaggy brown fur and ghastly wounds lined his sides. One of his ears was horribly shredded. Dismay gleamed in her eyes. Why couldn’t Dingo ever come out of a fight without looking like he had been in a bloodbath?

Her eyes narrowed with worry. “Are you okay?”

Dingo’s light brown eyes glinted in the moonlight. “I’m fine. Where’s Dash?”

Saderia’s heart skipped a beat as she gazed out at the battle. “I...I don’t know.”

Her eyes glinted with worry as she scanned the battlefield, but before she could make up her mind on what to do, a dark brown figure burst out from a shadowy crowd of fighting canines. Dash’s amber eyes shone through the darkness, blazing with exhilaration.

Relief swept over her like a wave. “There he is,” she gasped, her voice breathless.

Dingo nodded curtly and whirled around to face the outskirts of the camp that sat just a few paces away from them, his eyes dark with determination. “Come on, let’s get moving. He’ll catch up.”

Saderia frowned and cast a nervous glance at Dash as he raced across the sandy ground. Seeing her fearful look, Dash swiftly flicked his tail, signaling for them to go on. Taking a deep breath, Saderia nodded back, then turned to follow Dingo, knowing Dash would catch up soon. Her desert friend bounded off through the battlefield, leading her and Jeb close behind and Dash farther back. Weaving in and out of screaming, battling crowds, Dingo led the way toward the outskirts of the battlefield. Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced back at Dash and felt her heart stop.

Without warning, ten huge, snarling dingoes leapt out from the shadows around her and landed right behind her, blocking Dash from sight.

A shriek of horror tore out of her throat. “*Dash!*”

Skidding to a halt, she whipped around to face the crowd of dingoes. Behind the snarling dogs, Dash skidded to a halt right before he reached them, his eyes wide with alarm. Dingo and Jeb instantly froze and whirled around. At the same time, five pack members raced to join their allies, their eyes gleaming dangerously in the dim light.

Letting out a low growl, Dingo instantly took a step toward the wall of leering dingoes, but Saderia grabbed his leg to hold him back, her eyes wide with fear and disbelief. “Dingo, stop!” she shouted. “There’s almost twenty of them! We don’t stand a chance!”

Cruel sneers crossed the pack members’ faces. Chuckling coldly, they stalked toward them, licking their lips in anticipation. Saderia’s whole body froze in terror. Every instinct screamed to run, but her heart cried that she couldn’t leave Dash. But how could she get to him behind a wall of nearly twenty dingoes? Indecision shone on her face and she took a nervous step back. Looking up, she peered past the dingoes and spotted Dash standing nervously behind the crowd. The lion anxiously met her gaze, then narrowed his eyes in determination. Before anyone could make a move, he whipped around and raced away as fast as he could. His frantic voice rose in the air as he charged into the shadows.

“Run! I’ll catch up with you later, just run!” Snarls drowned out the rest of his words as several of the pack members whirled around to chase him. Their howls rang in the air as they disappeared into the crowd of battling canines, hard on Dash’s heels.

Shock and pain froze Saderia in place, making her eyes open wide and her heart skip. Those words...Wasn’t that what Dingo had said right before he had been ‘killed?’ Her paws itched to race after Dash or do *something*, but her legs seemed frozen in place.

Beside her, Dingo gritted his teeth and let out a low growl, taking a nervous step back. “We need to go,” he snarled. “Even I can’t fight off this many at once...”

Horror gleamed in her eyes. “But Dash...”

“We’ll circle around,” Dingo interrupted, his eyes flashing in the dim light. Without giving her a chance to protest, he flicked her sharply

with his tail, then whirled around to run, a growl rumbling in his throat. "We'll find him, I promise. He can take care of himself." When she hesitated, he paused and looked back to meet her gaze, his light brown eyes cold and stern. "Let's *go!*"

Her protest died away when a bloodthirsty howl rang out behind her. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to race after Dingo with Jeb close beside her. Behind her, the pack members thundered after them, howling for blood. Painful tears streamed down her face. *Again* she was running away from a friend when he needed her the most. What if Dash was killed? How could she live with herself if he was? Terrified sobs rose in her chest, but she forced herself to keep moving. All she could hope for was a miracle...

Dash's heart beat wildly in his chest. Shadowy fighting canines swirled past him on all sides. Heat washed over him, making a cold sweat break out on his brow. Howls echoed all around him and the thick scent of blood wafted through the air. Pack members thundered after him, howling as he weaved frantically in and out of fighting, screaming crowds. Already, he had lost a few pursuers, but he didn't dare look back to see how many. From the bloodthirsty howls and snarls trailing his every movement, he knew there were still too many following him to fight. If they caught up with him, he was dead.

His eyes flicked wildly around the battlefield, searching desperately for any escape. Everything around him was nothing but a dark, bloody blur. His mind whirled with every frantic step he took. In the back of his mind, he could still hear his own words hanging in the air. *'I'll catch up with you.'* Why had he said that? Those words had haunted Saderia ever since Dingo had supposedly died. What if he ended up dead, too?

His paws stumbled over each other. A yelp tore out of his throat, but he caught himself clumsily and forced himself to keep running. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the dingoes catching up, their paws pounding the ground in the same wild rhythm of his heart. Cold fear swept over him. Something dark flashed beside him and he looked up sharply, his heart pounding and his claws unsheathing. When he saw who soared beside him, his heart stopped and he let out a gasp, nearly freezing in his tracks.

Dastarius floated close beside him, his translucent black mane flowing out behind him and a cold gleam in his amber eyes. One sharp

smack from his black-tufted tail was all it took to jolt Dash back to reality and send him flying across the desert sand.

Dash's heart beat wildly as he struggled to keep moving. "What are you doing here?" he gasped, his voice harsh and shaky. "You...you can come to the real world?"

Dastarius rolled his eyes. "Of course I can. If Princess's spirit guide can do it, so can I." His eyes flashed and a dangerous glint lit up his eerie amber irises. "Enough questions. If you don't get out of here now, you're going to be joining me a bit prematurely."

Dash gritted his teeth and shot him a furious glare, his fur bristling. "I was *trying* to do that before you nearly gave me a heart attack!" His eyes flashed, but his glare faltered as his muscles screamed in pain. How long could he keep this up?

Dastarius coolly narrowed his eyes. "Do you want my help or not?"

Dash looked up at him quickly, his eyes wide and pleading. Hope and desperation gleamed in his amber irises. *Please...* The word burned in Dash's mind as he gazed up at his father. Please, for once, let Dastarius actually do something to help him...

Dastarius calmly flicked his tail and gestured toward a gap in between a crowd of fighting dogs. "Go that way. If you head in that direction, you'll reach the outskirts of the battle. Keep low to the ground and weave in and out of fights. That should shake your pursuers off your trail. After that, just run as fast as possible. If you make it out of here alive, I'll find you and tell you what to do from there. If not, I'll see you in the afterlife."

His words sent a shiver racing down Dash's spine, but he shot him a grateful smile and struggled to choke the words out between pants. "Thank you."

Dastarius simply nodded, then vanished into the shadows around him. Turning around, Dash raced in the direction his father had indicated as fast as his legs could carry him, his heart pounding wildly in his chest. All he wanted to do was live to see his friends again. If Dastarius could save him just once, he would owe him everything.

"I think we lost them." Dingo stumbled to a clumsy halt in the shadow of a tall sand dune sitting a few feet away from the bloody outskirts

of the battlefield. His breath wheezed out in short, heavy pants. Faint screams still echoed in the thick, cold night air several yards behind him.

Jeb stumbled down the side of the dune and collapsed on the sandy ground, letting out a shaky sigh. "Finally," he whispered, his voice high and hoarse with fear. His entire body trembled as he curled up on the sand and his eyes still glowed with fear.

Saderia staggered down the dune and whipped around to face them, her eyes wide with panic. "Don't just sit there! Dingo, you said we would circle around and find Dash!"

Dingo took a deep breath and rested his paw calmly on her shoulder. "And we will. Come on," he added, giving Jeb a gentle flick of his tail. "Don't get slack on me now."

Fear and dismay gleamed in Jeb's blue and green eyes, but he forced himself to stagger to his paws and face them, his legs shaking with terror. "S-Sorry..."

"It's okay." Seeing Saderia's urgent gaze, Dingo gave her a stern look. "We're going to go slow. That way, if dingoes are lurking around here, we won't alert them to our presence."

Saderia's eyes widened in dismay. "But Dash..."

"Dash will be fine." Dingo firmly narrowed his eyes. "As soon as he gets away from those dingoes, he'll probably stop to rest, which will give us plenty of time to find him. We'll circle around the outcasts' camp. He's bound to be around there somewhere."

"He better be." Her amber eyes glinted in the dim light and her claws dug furiously into the sand. "If we don't find him, *someone* is going to pay. I don't care if I have to go up to Rock himself and claw his eyes out. He's *not* going to kill my best friend."

"No, he's not." Dingo met her gaze steadily, his eyes calm. "And if you do that, I'll back you up. But Dash will be fine." Casting a quick glance at Jeb's frightened face, Dingo gazed out at the dark, empty desert around them. "Come on. Let's start searching."

A frown spread across Saderia's face. "No. Not yet."

Dingo's eyes narrowed in confusion and he glanced back at her with a frown.

"My Dream sense," she murmured, meeting his gaze with glowing, hopeful amber eyes. "Maybe I can use it to find Dash."

A faint smile spread across Dingo's face and he nodded thoughtfully, his light brown eyes lighting up. "That's a good idea. Go ahead and try it to see what you can find."

Nodding faintly, Saderia sat back on the cold sand, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes, shutting out the shadowy world around her. Everything around her disappeared—her friends, the chill of the night air, the dying screams in the distance, even the salty tang of blood wafting off the battlefield. Her thoughts focused solely on Dash. No matter how hard she willed her Dream sense to lead her to him, though, she felt...nothing. No instinct pulled her in any direction or gave her a sense of where to go or what to do...Her Dream sense told her nothing...

Her heart stopped and her eyes flew open in horror. Did that mean Dash was...dead?

Dingo leaned closer to her, his light brown eyes wide with curiosity. "What did you see? Which way should we go?"

Saderia shook her head slowly, her amber eyes blank and absent as she stared out at the desert sand. "I...I don't know. I didn't sense anything..."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock while Jeb looked up sharply in unease. The desert canine tipped his head to the side and frowned. "What? What does that mean?"

"I don't know." Saderia closed her eyes and let out a deep, shaky breath, her heart beating faster with fear. "What if...what if it means he's..."

"He's not dead."

Shock shot through Saderia at the sound of the light, feathery voice. Leaping to her paws, she whirled around and felt her heart skip when she saw who was behind her. A wispy, shining light brown dingo stood a few paces behind her, her light brown eyes calm and knowing. Around her neck hung a familiar, translucent pink ribbon.

Dingo gaped in shock, his eyes growing wide with disbelief. "C-Claw?"

A faint smile spread across the spirit's face. "Hi, Dingo," she whispered.

Hope glistened in Saderia's amber eyes and she took a shaky step toward her ghostly spirit guide. "Dash...He's not...dead?"

Claw shook her head and gave her a gentle smile. "No. He's fine, Saderia."

Relief washed over Saderia, leaving her feeling weak. Letting out a long, shaky breath, she swayed on her paws, finally feeling the overwhelming exhaustion that had haunted her throughout the battle. Looking up at Claw, she faced her spirit guide with wide, desperate amber eyes. "Are you sure?"

Claw let out a soft breath and nodded, her eyes gleaming with sympathy.

Saderia's voice quivered. "Then why can't I find him with my Dream sense?"

Claw shrugged. "I don't know. But...I can be of some assistance in finding him."

Hope burned in Saderia's heart. "You can tell me how to find Dash?"

"I can." Claw paused, then narrowed her eyes in a stern, warning look. "*But* Dash is in a bit of a minefield right now. Dingoes are crawling all over the place, especially in the area where he is. They haven't found him yet, but they're close to him."

Her heart ached with fear. "That's even more reason to find him quickly!"

"True." Claw met her gaze seriously, her eyes shadowed. "But you have to be careful. If you run into those dingoes, you won't walk away in good shape. You'll be hurt badly. Maybe even killed. You need to go slow and not be reckless. You'll also need to take an alternate route because if you try to just circle the outcast camp and go straight to him, you *will* run into dingoes. Lots of them. You're going to have to make a wider circle around the camp." She paused, then frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe that's why you couldn't find him with your Dream sense. Your instinct can only point you in one direction, and if you went straight to Dash, you would surely run into dingoes." The spirit hesitated, then calmly met her eyes. "Either way, you'll still have to take an alternate route."

Saderia took a deep breath and bit her lip worriedly. "How long will that take?"

Claw's eyes clouded with sympathy. "Several hours, at best. A few days, at worst."

Saderia winced and looked away, her heart aching with pain and fear.

Claw let out a soft breath and slowly stepped over to her, resting a soft, translucent brown paw on her shoulder. Her light brown eyes glowed reassuringly in the darkness of the night. "Don't worry. Dash can take care of himself. He's being careful, like you are. He'll be able to avoid the dingoes. You'll find him eventually."

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Forcing herself to look up, she met the friendly gaze of her spirit guide and managed a weak nod. "I hope you're right."

A faint smile crossed Claw's face and she gave a slight nod. "You'll see." Taking a deep breath, she glanced over her shoulder, then turned back and gave Saderia a smile. "Well, I won't bore you with details. I guess I should tell my brother the directions you need to take to get to Dash. He's the one who knows his way around the desert, after all."

Saderia managed a slight smile and nodded. "That would be great." Stepping aside to let Claw see Dingo, she glanced back at her canine friend with a smile, then froze and felt the smile slip off her face. Shock shot through her at the sight of her desert friend.

Dingo stood rigidly on the sand, his legs shaking almost violently. His light brown eyes stretched wide with pain, longing, and a dull, agonizing sense of grief. Never once did he blink or look away from his ghostly sister.

A worried frown spread across Saderia's face. "Dingo? Are you okay?"

He didn't answer. The desert dog didn't seem to have heard her at all. His light brown eyes remained locked on his sister, never blinking.

Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion and took a nervous step toward him. "Dingo? Don't you want to talk to Claw so she can tell you how to get to Dash?"

Dingo didn't say a word. Slowly, he shook his head over and over again and took several shaky steps back, nearly tripping over himself. "I...I can't," he stammered.

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jeb shrink back near the bottom of a nearby sand dune, his yellow and black-striped fur bristling with fear. Barely sparing a glance at the

frightened creature, she looked back at Dingo and frowned in confusion. “Why not? I...I thought you would want to talk to her.”

Dingo desperately shook his head. “I can’t,” he repeated, his hoarse voice barely above a whisper. “I just...can’t...” His voice trailed off and he stumbled back, never looking away from Claw. Pain gleamed in his eyes. It was as if he couldn’t move or do anything.

Shock glimmered in Saderia’s eyes. She had never seen Dingo in such a fragile state. In all the time she had known him, he had never seemed as weak as he did now...Her heart ached at the sight of the misery and grief burning in his light brown eyes. What was wrong with him? Why did he suddenly seem so stricken?

Without warning, her thoughts flew out of her mind and a soft gasp escaped her throat as her Dream sense took over. Pain crashed down on her like a tidal wave, making her shiver. A million different images flew through her mind—memories that weren’t her own. An image of a tiny pup with light brown fur, gleaming light brown eyes, and a bright pink ribbon tied around her neck flashed through her mind a second before another memory replaced it. Another scene flashed through her mind, then another and another.

An image of a shaggy brown pup playing tag with the light brown dingo. A memory of an older light brown dingo caring for an older, wounded shaggy brown dog in the darkness of a tiny rock den. A picture of the two canines lying peacefully side by side as they drifted off to sleep. An image of the two dingoes talking softly in the darkness outside a sleepy camp. A vision of an older light brown dingo burying her face in the shaggy dog’s chest, her sides shaking with tears. A new image of the light brown dingo’s smiling face and glowing light brown eyes. A memory of the two canines sitting in darkness, gazing up at the stars. “*Promise me.*” Then a memory of blood and darkness flickered through her mind. A memory of the light brown dingo lying on the dark sand, her pink ribbon soaked with blood flashed through her mind, making her wince with grief.

Claw. The word echoed in her mind in a voice filled with such tenderness and pain, it sent a shiver down her spine. Her heart felt as if it were being ripped in two.

A second later, the visions faded and she blinked open her eyes, as if resurfacing from deep water. The dark desert reappeared, along with her

two friends and ghostly spirit guide. A chill washed over her when she saw the pained, miserable look on Dingo's face. In the back of her mind, she realized her Dream sense had shown her Dingo's thoughts. The visions she had seen were memories. They had been Dingo's whole life.

Claw flinched and eyed her brother uneasily, her light brown eyes narrowed in concern. "I could just tell you which direction to go, and then come back when you need to change directions," she murmured, glancing sadly at Saderia.

"No..." Dingo shook his head sharply as if to snap himself out of his daze, his voice shaky. "I...I can...It's just directions..." Shaking his head, he faced Claw with wide eyes, his voice a weak whisper, as if he was trying to convince himself. "I can...I can deal with just directions..." His voice trailed off and Saderia's heart twisted at the sight of his dull, lost expression. His light brown eyes seemed distant and blank—confused, as if he couldn't quite figure out what was going on or why he was feeling the way he was.

Claw's eyes clouded with sympathy and guilt. "Okay," she murmured, her voice quiet and hesitant. After a long pause, she slowly floated closer to her brother, her eyes never leaving his face. The second she moved closer to him, Dingo flinched and looked away, digging his claws into the sand as if it took everything he had not to run away.

The light spirit hesitated, then leaned down and murmured the directions softly in his ear. Standing rigidly still, Dingo listened intently, forcing himself not to look at Claw and gazing out at the desert with wide, clouded eyes. Slowly, Claw stepped away when she had finished giving directions and gave him a faint smile. "Did you get that?"

Dingo took a deep breath and nodded slowly. "I think...I think I can find my way," he choked out, keeping his eyes focused on his paws, unable to meet Claw's gaze.

Claw managed a weak smile and nodded. "All right." She paused, then slowly backed away, her eyes clouded with regret. "Well, I guess I should be going. If you need me, just call me, and I'll come." Glancing at Saderia out of the corner of her eye, she managed a faint smile. "You should be fine now. Just try to be patient." Her light brown eyes flicked from Saderia's face to Jeb's, then lingered sadly on her brother. "Goodbye."

Her wispy, translucent form started to fade, but before she vanished, Dingo looked up sharply, his light brown eyes wide with desperation. "Claw, wait!"

Claw blinked in surprise, then slowly began to rematerialize. Turning back to meet her brother's wide, frantic eyes, she frowned, her voice a soft, feathery whisper. "Yes?"

Dingo hesitated, then took a few clumsy steps toward her, nearly tripping over his own paws. "Did you see?" he choked out, seeming to stumble over his words. "Those dingoes were...nice. They were nice. They were...like us." He paused, then shivered violently and closed his eyes. "Do you know if any of them are even still alive?"

Claw took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her light brown eyes clouding but a faint, weak smile spreading across her face. "Yes. The battle's almost over now. Many of the outcasts managed to run away and hide. I'm sure most of them will recover."

Dingo let out a shaky sigh and nodded. "That's good...I guess." He hesitated, then slowly looked up and met his sister's gaze, his light brown eyes clouded with pain. "It was good to see you again," he whispered, his tense voice barely audible. "I miss you."

Claw's light brown eyes clouded. "I miss you too." She paused, then gave him a faint smile, her eyes sparkling in the dim light. "It was nice to see you again, too, in real life."

Dingo nodded slowly and let out a shaky sigh, taking a few weak steps back.

Claw's eyes shone in the darkness. "I should go now, so I can keep an eye on the outcasts and Dash. But if any of you need anything, just call me. And don't worry." A playful smile crossed her face and she giggled at Jeb's fearful expression. "I won't hurt you."

Without another word, the wispy spirit faded and vanished into thin air. Everyone blinked the instant she vaporized, as if returning to reality. Taking a deep breath, Saderia slowly turned to look at Dingo, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tell what he was feeling. This time, it wasn't because he had managed to hide his emotions. This time, it was because there were so many, it was impossible to tell the difference.

Dash collapsed onto the cold sand, his chest heaving with heavy pants. Pain and exhaustion haunted him. A weak sense of relief trickled into his mind at having left his pursuers far behind, but his muscles remained tense and stiff, prepared to run. Any minute now, they could find him again...Weakly, he lifted his head and gazed out at the empty, shadowed sand dunes rising up around him. A low, painful groan escaped his throat and his eyes clouded with fear and desperation. "What do I do now...?"

A split-second after the words left his mouth, the dark, translucent form of his father appeared out of thin air, making him jump and nearly shout out in fear. Dastarius's amber eyes glinted in the dim light as his son staggered frantically to his paws.

"You listen to me," he answered, his voice cool and his gaze knowing. "You're going to need my help to get out of this mess, so you're going to have to trust me."

Chapter Twenty

Retreat

The first few hours of traveling weren't so bad as long as Dash managed to not think about the fact that his life depended solely on Dastarius. That little fact worried him a bit...but if he was able to ignore it, then the situation wasn't quite so bad. Apart from the fact that his aching legs felt sorer than ever before. Not to mention, his entire body felt exhausted after so much fighting. Plus, there was that never-ending sense of fear lurking in the back of his mind, telling him that pack members could be hiding behind any one of the dunes he and his father passed by. Rock himself might even be lurking behind them. If one of those dingoes found him, his ghostly father wouldn't be able to sweet talk his way out of that. The thought sent a fearful shiver racing down his spine.

Dastarius led the way confidently through the tall, endless sand dunes, his amber eyes gleaming and his black-tipped tail swishing lightly across the sand. Dash envied his invisibility. Unlike his spectral father, he had no choice but to crouch down as low to the ground as possible to avoid being seen by any dingoes who might happen to be lurking around the desert. After several hours of practically crawling along the gritty ground, it had gotten old. His legs were already exhausted, and having to crouch down only made him even more uncomfortable. His father didn't let him take many breaks either.

Pink streaks of light soared across the dark sky as the sun began to rise. A heavy sigh whispered out of Dash's mouth and his eyelids drooped. Vaguely, he wondered where his friends were and if they were okay...When Dash had first escaped the battle, he had insisted that he wait to see if Saderia would find him. Unfortunately, an hour had passed and no one had come to his rescue...except Dastarius. With no other option, he had reluctantly agreed to let his father lead him to his friends.

Dash's eyes flicked up to his shadowy father and a shiver of apprehension raced down his spine. Dastarius had told him that as a ghost,

he could see everything from the spirit realm and could easily lead the way through the desert, but Dash had felt a *lot* better when Dingo had been guiding him. Dastarius might be able to see everything in the spirit world, but in real life, he didn't have the navigation skills Dingo had. With every step Dash took, he couldn't help but wonder if he was getting farther away from his friends.

Dash's stomach rumbled too loudly in the tense silence. His ears flattened and unease washed over him as he was reminded of another problem. When the battle had broken out, Dash had forgotten his food pack in the confusion. Which meant he was lost in the desert with only his evil father as a guide, away from his friends, *without food*.

Dastarius narrowed his eyes and glanced back at him over his shoulder. "Keep quiet. There are dingoes all around us."

Dash flattened his ears. "I can't help it I'm hungry! Unlike you, I have to eat!" Casting a furtive glance at his surroundings, he glared at his father in annoyance. "And you keep telling me that 'there are dingoes all around us,' but so far I haven't seen any!"

Dastarius coolly narrowed his eyes. "I would have thought you would be grateful for that."

Dash heaved a sigh and tried to stifle a twinge of guilt. Maybe Dastarius was right. Maybe it was only because of him that he had been able to avoid trouble for this long. "Sorry," he muttered, looking down at his paws. "I'm just nervous right now."

Dastarius shot him a cool, absent glance. "Why?"

Dash's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "Uh...let's see. I'm lost, hungry, away from Saderia, wounded, bleeding, and apparently surrounded by dingoes."

Dastarius flicked his tail and relented. "I suppose the situation isn't ideal."

"You think?" Dash muttered under his breath. Dastarius ignored him and merely kept walking, keeping his gaze focused on the land ahead. Heaving a long sigh, Dash rolled his eyes and struggled to keep up with him, trying to shake off his annoyance. "Do you have any idea how long it will be before we meet up with Saderia?"

Dastarius shrugged carelessly. "It could take a few hours or a week. If I had to guess, I'd say we'll find them in a few days or so."

Dash gaped at him in horror. "A few days?"

Dastarius heaved a sigh. "I suppose you'll be complaining about eating the entire time."

Dash flattened his ears and glared at him, a gleam of panic creeping into his eyes. "Sorry, but I kind of have to find something to eat in order to keep living!"

Dastarius's eyes flashed and a low, warning growl rumbled in his throat. "Keep your voice down. Or else *you'll* be something to eat."

Dash narrowed his eyes in annoyance, but lowered his voice. "I *have* to eat, Dad. A few days without food is going to take its toll. And besides, I don't even know if Saderia will have food when I find her. She forgot her pack when the fight started, too."

His father let out an annoyed sigh. "All right, fine. How did you and Princess survive in the desert in the past when you didn't have food?"

Dash wrinkled his nose. "We lived off cactus juice. But that stuff was gross..."

Dastarius rolled his eyes and cast him an exasperated glance over his shoulder. "Now is hardly the time to be prissy, Dash."

Dash flattened his ears in indignation. "I'm not being prissy!"

"Then stay put while I go to the spirit realm," Dastarius snapped, turning around to face him with a cool, warning expression. "I'll go to the spirit world to search for the nearest cactus. Stay close to the ground and keep out of sight while I'm gone."

Before Dash could protest, Dastarius vanished into thin air, leaving Dash alone in the dark, shadowy desert. Rolling his eyes, Dash let out a frustrated sigh and slumped down on the ground, resting his belly on the sand and spreading his paws out to rest his aching muscles. The instant he lay down, though, he began to regret his sigh. The sound seemed oddly loud with no one around. The entire desert suddenly seemed eerily silent, too quiet for his liking. Too...dangerous. Biting his lip, Dash nervously tucked his paws under his belly and huddled closer to the ground. His eyes scanned the dark sand dunes rising up all around him for any sign of life. The sun hadn't yet risen, but it had cast just enough light to form eerie shadows in the dark desert. A shiver raced down his spine.

Words Dastarius had told him plenty of times before floated through his mind. *There are dingoes all around us.* Unease clouded Dash's mind

and he flattened his ears, feeling a tingle of panic. The shadows dancing on the dunes around him suddenly looked like mangy pack dogs crawling toward him, preparing to strike. Shivers raced down his spine and he bit his lip to hide his fear. More than anything, he wished his father would hurry up and leave the spirit realm. Even if he was just a ghost, he was better than nothing. Creepy or not, having him around was better than being alone in this dangerous place...

Without warning, his father suddenly appeared out of thin air, his pitch black mane and dark brown fur taking shape out of the shadows in front of him. Terror shot through Dash and he leapt wildly to his paws, just barely managing to bite back a scream. Relief washed over him when he recognized his father, but he tried to hide the happiness on his face. Narrowing his eyes, he glared at Dastarius and tried to ignore the tremor in his voice. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "I'm a ghost, Dash. How would you like me to sneak up on you?"

Dash lashed his tail in irritation. "Never mind. Did you find a cactus?"

"Yes," Dastarius replied, giving a light flick of his tail. "And I'm getting a bit sick of your complaining, so let's hurry up and find it."

Dash just rolled his eyes and reluctantly crouched down to creep along the desert floor behind him, trying to hide a lingering sense of fear. He didn't want Dastarius to know how much he needed him. Nonetheless, he found himself moving closer to his ghostly father and keeping his complaints to himself.

Disgust rose in Dash's throat as he gulped down the disgusting liquid dripping from the spiny, green cactus, but he tried not to show his distaste. The dark lion stood beside a tall, thick cactus, holding out his tongue to catch the liquid dripping from a tiny gash in the plant. When he had sliced open the hard cactus, he had managed to avoid the jutting spikes, so he tried to count his blessings. Gradually, the cactus stopped leaking juice until Dash finally stepped away, wiping his mouth and trying not to gag. At least he wouldn't have to drink more of that gross stuff for a while...

Gingerly, he stepped away from the cactus and turned back to look for his father. Panic shot through him when he couldn't find Dastarius until he managed to make out his translucent form waiting for him just a few paces away. Bright yellow sunlight streamed out over the desert, piercing through the dark lion's shadowy form and making him nearly impossible to see. Ghosts were much easier to make out in the dark...Heaving a relieved sigh, Dash stumbled over to him and looked up at him with dull, tired amber eyes.

"Thanks for getting me here," he muttered, starting to trust his father's abilities just a little. After all, he *had* found a cactus. Maybe he really could lead him to his friends...

Dastarius merely nodded in response and turned to lead him away.

Letting out a soft sigh, Dash crouched down low to the ground and tiredly followed after him, blinking to keep the sun's blistering rays out of his eyes. When the sun had risen up over the horizon, Dastarius had warned him to not say a word and to keep as close to the ground as possible. Without the cover of darkness, it would be even harder to hide from the pack members. According to Dastarius, the evil dingoes still lurked around the desert, wanting to make sure that no outcast had escaped the attack. Clearly, some had, so now the pack members had taken to hunting them down.

A shiver crept down Dash's spine. Wanting to seem brave, he tried not to feel so terrified, but trying to push away his fear was a difficult task when he knew there were dingoes—dingoes hungry for blood—all around him. Now he knew how Dingo had felt back when the pack had been hunting him down...

Catching his dark, uneasy expression, Dastarius glanced back with a calm, cool gaze. "Don't worry," he muttered. "If the dingoes see you, you'll be tough enough to fight them off—at least long enough for you to run. I'll lead you away from them if they come."

A grateful smile crept across Dash's face and he nodded quickly. "Thank you."

Saderia's eyelids drooped with exhaustion with every step she took. Dingo led the way through the endless sea of dunes, his eyes calm and determined. Behind them, Jeb stumbled sleepily after them, struggling to

keep up. Guilt gleamed in Saderia's eyes and she vaguely wondered if she should let her friends take a break. Panic burned in her chest the instant she considered it, though. The thought of leaving Dash alone in the desert sent shivers down her spine. They *had* to find him...and fast. Her eyes narrowed and dismay swept over her. At the rate they were going, finding him probably wouldn't happen soon enough.

Her stomach growled, reminding her of the painful, empty feeling in her belly. Neither she nor her friends had seen a hint of food or water since they had left their food packs behind on the battlefield. The logical part of her mind told her that if she didn't find some source of sustenance soon, she and her friends would waste away, but all she could think of was Dash. Opening her mouth, she started to urge her friends to move faster, then broke off abruptly when Dingo suddenly stopped in front of her.

Cautiously, he turned to face her, his eyes wary and tired. "How about a break?"

Her eyes flashed with indignation and she lashed her tail. "But Dash is out there!"

"True. But he's still alive and out of danger. If he was in any trouble, Claw would have told us. You know that." Dingo met her gaze sternly, then glanced thoughtfully up at the sky, a dreamy look creeping into his eyes. Pink streaks of light shot out over the lightening sky as the boiling sun rose. A weary sigh escaped Dingo's throat. "We've been walking all night. We're exhausted, Saderia. Even you are. You and Jeb can barely stand."

Saderia flattened her ears and glared at him. "*You* don't seem exhausted."

Dingo shrugged. "I don't get tired. I used to stay up every night for weeks to make sure I wasn't killed in my sleep. Tiredness doesn't have the same effect on me that it does on you and Jeb. Don't deny it. Both of you are going to collapse any moment now."

Saderia lashed her tail and silently cursed herself when even that simple action sent a wave of exhaustion crashing over her. "We can make it," she hissed. "I'm sure after all this walking we've done, Dash can't be too far away..."

"That's where you're wrong." Dingo narrowed his eyes and coolly met her gaze. "I know what Claw told me. We're still a long way away from him."

Saderia's heart skipped with dismay. "That just means we have to keep going!"

Dingo let out an exasperated sigh. "If you keep going the way you're going, you're never going to make it."

Saderia opened her mouth to protest, but the words died away when she heard a soft squeak behind her. Looking back, she saw Jeb's shaky legs give out beneath him, sending him sprawling to the ground. His eyes slipped shut and it seemed to take all of his strength to pry them back open. Guilt burned in Saderia's chest at the sight of her tiny friend. Deep down, she knew it was wrong to make them keep moving, but she couldn't stand the thought of wasting a moment. Dash was out there somewhere, waiting for her...

Dingo stepped closer to her and rested his paw gently on her shoulder. When she whipped around to face him, he steadily met her gaze. "Listen, Saderia. We'll only take a little nap—just enough to get some of our strength back. While you're sleeping, there's a good chance you'll Dream. Your Dreams will warn you if anything will happen to Dash in the future, so if you sleep now, you'll actually be doing something productive."

Saderia frowned and hesitated uncertainly. Claw *would* have warned her if Dash was in trouble, and her Dreams *would* give her some insight...A heavy sigh escaped her throat as she glanced darkly down at her paws. "Fine. I guess you're right, Dingo."

A faint smile crept across his face. "All right. You and Jeb lie down and get some sleep. I'll look for food while you two are resting. When I get back, I'll sleep if you're still sleeping or else just start leading the way again. Don't panic if I'm not here."

Saderia hesitated uncertainly, then managed a weak smile and nodded gratefully. "All right. Thanks, Dingo. Er...what kind of food are you going to get?"

He shrugged. "If you want, I can try to find a cactus and cut a piece off to fill with juice, or else I'll be better off hunting. I don't know which you guys would prefer to eat."

She let out a sigh. "Which one would take less time and keep you closer to us?"

"Hunting," Dingo replied, flicking his tail. "There might not be another cactus for miles, and even though I wouldn't get lost, it still might

take a while to get back to you.”

Saderia let out a soft breath. “All right, that’s fine with me.” Glancing over her shoulder, she met Jeb’s tired gaze. “How about you, Jeb? Would that be okay with you?”

Jeb narrowed his eyes uneasily. “I...I guess. Is it gross?”

“We’re going to find out.” Saderia flicked her tail. “Go ahead, Dingo. It’s fine.”

He nodded and gave them a gentle glance. “All right. You two get some sleep. If I’m not back when you wake up, don’t panic. Just stay in this spot and I’ll find you.”

“Got it. See you soon.” Saderia managed a weak smile, then slowly lowered herself down onto the sandy ground. Her eyelids fluttered shut as she rested her head tiredly on her paws. Before her head even touched the ground, though, she was already asleep. The last thing she heard before she sunk deep into unconsciousness was the soft thud of Dingo’s paw steps.

Darkness greeted Saderia the instant her eyes fluttered open, but instead of a flash of fear, all she felt was a dull sense of calm unease, like the calm before a storm. Slowly, the shadows faded away, revealing a hazy image through the darkness. A dark, blurry figure padded silently through miles of rolling sand dunes, all alone. *Dash*. In her heart, Saderia knew it was him, but not because she could clearly see him. Shadows covered him like a thick blanket, making his dark brown form nearly impossible to make out. If she didn’t know better, she wouldn’t have known who this shadowed stranger was...

A strange sense of serenity hung tensely over the scene. The vision seemed almost lethargic or surreal. Deadly. A sense of something darker and more dangerous seemed to lurk just out of sight, but as she watched, nothing happened. Shadowy figures crept to the tops of the dunes *Dash* passed by, but none seemed to notice him, as if something were protecting him from them. Tense tranquility lingered over the scene as *Dash* crept through the sand dunes. Slowly, darkness crept over the vision, whisking the scene away and dulling her senses until she slipped back into unconsciousness, dead to the world.

Saderia's eyes fluttered sleepily open and a long yawn escaped her throat. Piercing sunlight shone down from the bright blue sky, stinging her amber irises. Blinking against the harsh light, she tiredly raised her head, a gleam of confusion in her eyes. Drowsily, she gazed around at the desert sand and paused when she spotted Dingo standing just a few paces away from her, gazing down at her with a warm smile.

"Have a nice nap?" he asked, giving her a friendly smile and a flick of his tail.

Saderia blinked several times, not quite sure what had happened. "Sort of..." She hesitated, then slowly pushed herself up and sat back to gaze out at the desert, her mind whirling with confusion. Her eyes flicked across the bright hot sand and landed on Jeb, who slept peacefully on the sizzling ground, his legs splayed out and his eyes closed. Shaking herself, she looked up at Dingo and wearily put a paw to her forehead. "How long was I asleep?"

Dingo shrugged. "A few hours or so."

Saderia simply nodded, her eyes blurry and unfocused.

Dingo frowned and studied her curiously. "Did you Dream?"

"I...think so." She frowned in bewilderment. "It was really strange. It was... slow and calm. Nothing bad happened. I don't think I've ever had a *pleasant* Dream before."

Dingo hid a grin. "Was it about Dash?" When she nodded absently, a faint smile crossed his face. "Well, that's a good thing, right? Your Dream told you he was okay."

"I guess..." She narrowed her eyes, feeling a jolt of unease. "It was odd, though. Usually, I only Dream when something *bad* is going to happen. And...Dash didn't look like he normally does in Dreams. He was shadowed. He looked like...like *you* did when I first had Dreams about you—before I knew who you were or what you looked like. I always thought that if a figure in my Dream was shadowed, it meant...I don't know them."

Dingo just shrugged and flicked his tail. "Maybe there was just bad lighting."

"Maybe..." She frowned uncertainly, then shook herself and pushed the thoughts away. "Never mind. I guess I shouldn't be so suspicious of a good nap." She paused, then glanced curiously up at Dingo. "Did you get any sleep?"

“Yep. I slept for an hour or two when I got back.” Smiling proudly, he glanced down at the ground where two pieces of prey lay at his feet. “I brought food, as promised. One for you, one for Jeb. I already ate.”

She managed a weak smile. “Thanks. I guess catching this must have been hard work, huh?” Pausing, she leaned down and took a hesitant bite of the food. Even though she preferred the food of her home, it didn’t taste *that* bad. Wanting to hurry up and get moving, she wolfed it down quickly, then turned to Dingo, giving him a slight smile.

Dingo glanced mildly at Jeb’s sleeping form. “Do you want me to wake Jeb?”

She heaved a sigh and shook her head. “Not yet. Let him sleep just a little longer. After all, we have a lot of walking ahead of us.” Her Dream flashed through her mind and a shiver raced down her spine despite the heat. “I just hope we find Dash soon...”

“Can we *please* take a break?” Dash let out a painful groan, his paws aching with exhaustion. A few dying rays of light shot out over the horizon as the sun sank beneath the sand, stinging his eyes. When Dastarius let out an annoyed sigh, Dash gazed pleadingly up at him. “Please? I think my paws are literally about to fall off! I need to rest for a while!”

Dastarius glared at him in disdain. “No. I’m not going to indulge your whininess.”

Dash gaped at him in disbelief. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that as soon as I get you back to Princess and your friends, we still have a plan to complete,” Dastarius growled, shooting him a cool, warning glare. “You’re going to have to remember my previous lessons. And whining wasn’t one of them.” His tail twitched in annoyance. “If this is how you act in a crisis, you are doomed to failure.”

Dash heaved a sigh and resisted the urge to roll his eyes in annoyance. Maybe Dastarius was right, anyway. Whatever his great plan was, he seemed to know what he was doing and he *had* helped him. By teaching him better fighting moves, his father had prepared him for the battle at the outcast camp. Even if he didn’t want to admit it, he knew he would have been in trouble if Dastarius hadn’t helped him improve his skills. From his few fights with the pack members, he could tell that they

had greatly improved since the last time he had faced off against them. All of them seemed even more ruthless now.

Dash let out a sigh and forced himself to hold his head up higher, meeting Dastarius's gaze with a challenging gleam in his eyes. "I think we should take a break now," he growled, his tone as firm and commanding as possible.

Dastarius paused and studied him curiously, then slowly sat back. "That's better," he growled, flexing his claws and letting a faint sneer creep across his face.

Internally heaving a sigh of relief, Dash slowly sank down onto the sand, trying not to show any weakness. If he was with anyone else, he would have just collapsed onto his side without a care as to what anyone thought, but with Dastarius, he tried not to show his exhaustion. A faint gleam of approval crept into Dastarius's amber eyes, as if he was pleased at Dash's restraint. Trying not to wince, Dash carefully stretched out his paws, hoping feeling would return to them before Dastarius made him start walking again. Which would probably be in about five minutes. Stupid ghosts...

Annoyance burned in Dash's chest, but then he wondered...Why should Dastarius be able to make him do anything? What was he going to do if he refused to start walking? Punch him? He was a ghost. About the only thing he *could* do was leave Dash alone, which would effectively ruin his day, but other than that, Dash pretty much had the most power. The thought seemed strange. So used to Saderia making the decisions, it seemed odd to think he could control when they walked or took a break. Usually, she handled all that.

Glancing restlessly at the desert, Dastarius rose to his paws and sharply flicked his tail. "We need to get going."

Dash narrowed his eyes. Now seemed as good a time as any to test his power. Looking up, he forced himself to meet his father's cool amber eyes steadily and keep his voice firm and unwavering. "No, we should stay here. We've got plenty of time."

Dastarius raised an eyebrow, then let a faint smirk cross his face. "All right."

Dash blinked in surprise when his father sat back down to wait, then let a tiny sneer of his own creep across his face. Turning back around, he

stretched out on the sand to rest.

Hours later, the two of them trudged slowly through the desert sand, having ended their break several hours earlier. Pain and exhaustion still haunted Dash's weary legs, but at least they felt slightly less sore. To avoid being seen by pack members, Dash still had to crouch down and creep across the sand, but he was beginning to wonder if Dastarius had lied about there being dingoes all around him. Hours had passed by under the withering sun and he certainly hadn't seen any dingoes, nor had he heard anything. Despite his annoyance, though, he didn't say a thing, knowing that any complaints would get the minimal amount of respect Dastarius held for him bumped back down to zero.

Hour after hour dragged by under the boiling sun. Dash's vision blurred, but he didn't say a word as he stumbled after his father. Gradually, the sun sank toward the horizon, vanishing under the sand with a few last rays. Darkness crept across the sky as the last rays of sunlight disappeared. Soon, silver stars appeared in the black night sky.

Lost in thought, Dash found his mind wandering to thoughts of his friends and how they were doing. Surprisingly, though he missed them, he wasn't as worried as he thought he would be. The three of them must be okay. Between Dingo and Saderia, they would have been able to fight their way out of the battle. Dingo would probably be able to find them something to eat in addition to guiding them. Vaguely, he wondered if they were searching for him or waiting for him to find them. Probably the first one. Saderia would never be able to sit back and wait for him to return to her. She hated waiting.

Shaking his thoughts away, Dash looked up sharply when Dastarius stopped in front of him. A frown spread across his face at the abrupt halt. "What's the holdup?"

Dastarius glanced back at him, a cool expression on his face. "I need to go to the spirit realm to check our position. Will you be all right down here for a while?"

All Dash's fur rose up in unease. Night had already fallen. Darkness covered the sky and cast eerie shadows across the towering dunes all around him. The last thing Dash wanted was for Dastarius to leave him alone in the desert at night, but he knew his father would only roll his eyes if he voiced his protests. Besides, it would only be for a minute...Trying to

convince himself, he held his head higher and tried to hide his fear. "Of course. Take your time."

Dastarius simply nodded, then vanished into thin air, leaving him alone in the darkness. Taking a deep breath, Dash tried not to panic, but he couldn't stop his fur from bristling nervously. He really hated being on his own in unfamiliar territory...Granted, after traveling so many times, the desert was more of a second home at that point, but it was still dangerous and deadly. No amount of familiarity would change that.

Trying to seem calm so as to convince himself he wasn't afraid, Dash sat back and curled his tail neatly over his paws the way Dastarius had in so many of their meetings. His calm display didn't last long. Without warning, a low growl sounded in the eerie silence, making Dash nearly jump in alarm. *Dingoes*. Freezing in place, he ducked down low to the ground and barely suppressed a whimper. Fear washed over him like a wave and he desperately pricked his ears, hoping beyond hope that he was just hearing things...

A shiver of dread raced through him when another gruff voice sounded from behind a dark sand dune just a few feet away. Fear washed over him and indecision gleamed in his eyes. Should he stay put and hope that Dastarius would return soon to lead him away from there? Should he run away now and hope Dastarius found him later?

Should he try to figure out what the eerie voices were saying?

What a great idea. Dash almost rolled his eyes at himself despite his fear. Sometimes he really hated his curiosity, but no matter what, he couldn't ignore the wonder burning in the back of his mind. Maybe he could just creep a little closer to the dark nearby sand dune to try to hear what the dingoes were saying. If they discovered him, he could always run. If worse came to worst, he could probably fight them off, too. Probably...

He glanced cautiously over his shoulders. Taking a deep breath, he hesitated, then slowly crept toward the sand dune, keeping low to the ground so his belly brushed the sand. His paws didn't make a sound as he slunk across the ground, inching closer and closer to the tall dune. Low, indistinguishable growls whispered from behind the dune, nearly making him jump every time he heard them. Keeping himself under control, Dash crept closer, all the while hoping that Dastarius would appear, snap at him

for being an idiot, then talk some sense into him and lead him away from danger. But Dastarius didn't appear.

Unable to help himself, Dash crouched down near the bottom of the tall, shadowy sand dune and pricked his ears, listening intently for the voices on the other side of the hill of sand. He nearly jumped when a low growl sounded behind the dune.

"We're done looking today," a gruff voice muttered. "There are no outcasts here. Besides, I don't care about them anyway. The rest of the pack can hunt them down." An eerie sneer crept into his voice. "I'm only looking for one dingo."

That voice...Unease crept into Dash's mind. He recognized it from somewhere, but where?

Another voice let out a low, curious growl. "You really saw him? In the battle with the outcasts?"

"Yeah," the first voice growled. "He seems to be all over the place."

"Are you sure you didn't just see someone that looked like him?" another voice asked, his tone guarded but curious.

"Yeah," another echoed. "Why would he come back to the desert?"

Dash tensed and shivered. At least four pack dogs stood just a few paces away from him with only one meager sand dune separating them from him. Lovely. Part of him wondered if he should run, but a dangerous sense of curiosity and dread kept him frozen in place. He had a bad feeling he knew who they were talking about...

A dangerous tone crept into the first speaker's voice. "Yes, I'm sure it was him. I'd recognize him anywhere. You don't forget the face of the one who killed your friend."

Rock. The realization flashed through Dash's mind, making his fur rise up in terror. Remembering his past run-ins with the young dingo Leader, Dash suddenly recognized his gruff voice. Fear and nervousness swept over him, making him freeze in alarm. The pack *Leader* was behind that sand dune. The pack Leader, the one who had staged the battle with the outcasts. The most bloodthirsty dingo in the pack.

Was it too late to run? Every inch of Dash longed to escape while he could, but his icy paws refused to move. Morbid curiosity kept him anchored in place. With a shiver of dread, Dash realized Rock must have

meant Bone when he mentioned his murdered friend. That meant he could only be talking about one dingo...

"Besides, I saw his forest food," Rock growled, confirming what Dash already knew and making his heart sink with dread. Rock was talking about Dingo. The cruel pack Leader must have seen him in battle...and now he was looking for him...

Rock let out a dark, deadly growl. "Dingo was in that fight. And he was on the outcasts' side. Surprise, surprise. I'm not sure, but I think he's up to something."

"Like what?" one of the others growled.

"And why should we care?" another spoke up, his voice thick with contempt. "I mean, it's only Dingo. It's not like he can do anything."

"Dingo can do a lot more than you think," Rock growled, a cool, dangerous tone in his low voice. "It's not safe to underestimate him anymore. As much as I hate to admit it, Dingo's a force to be reckoned with."

One of the other dingoes snickered. "Yeah, the unstable kind."

"Yes." Rock's gruff voice was grave with seriousness. "And if Bone's death has taught us anything, it's to not mess with crazies. As far as I can tell, Dingo and his forest food managed to escape that battle. They're all still out here somewhere in the desert."

"Not necessarily. Maybe they went back to the forest," one of the others suggested. "I mean, it's not like they have any real reason to be out here."

"Oh, they have a reason." Dash could practically hear the sneer in Rock's cool voice. "I think I know exactly why they're out here. And even if they have gone home for now, I guarantee you they'll be back again. I've got something they want."

A chill swept over Dash at Rock's cold, sadistic words and his blood ran cold with unease. What did he mean by that?

Surprise tinged the voice of one of the other canines. "They're here for *that*?"

"Why else would the forest food be here? And who else would they pick to lead them here? Dingo's helping the forest food again." Rock paused, then let out a low, dark growl. "And you all know just how far he's willing to go to help them, so we need to be careful. I expect two of you to

be guarding the prisoner at all times. I want one of you to lead several parties of dingoes into the desert to hunt down the outcasts three times a day. I would prefer to torture them a while longer, but we don't have a choice anymore. They're a source of information I don't want Dingo to get his paws on. I want every one of them dead. And I expect the rest of you to lead the pack in fighting practice four times a day."

At once, all of the dingoes growled in agreement. "Got it."

Dash shivered and tried to think of how many were hiding behind the dune. Five plus Rock, maybe? Unease glowed in his amber eyes and he couldn't help but remember what Thunder had told his friends. Rock was the pack Leader, but he had 'favorites' that got all the privileges in the pack. Were those the dingoes Rock was talking to now? A shiver of fear raced through him. Rock's favorites could only be the toughest, most bloodthirsty dingoes in the pack, dingoes that could rip him apart with one swipe.

Terror blazed in Dash's eyes. He stood rigidly still, not daring to run. At that point, he was too afraid the dingoes would notice the movement and attack if he ran. He was one of 'Dingo's forest food,' after all, which meant he was high up on Rock's hit list. Maybe he would get lucky and the six dingoes would simply walk away without finding him...

"What about Dingo?" one canine growled. "Do you want us to kill him too?"

"No," Rock murmured in a cool tone, making Dash prick his ears in surprise. "He's a key player in my plan and I need him alive. For now, at least."

"What about his forest food?" another snarled.

Rock hesitated for a moment, then spoke in a dark, knowing voice. "They have a leader. The tiger. She's the only one I need alive. The rest—the little lion thing and the freak from the weird forest—aren't needed. You can dispose of them if you want."

One let out a gruff growl. "So kill the others, but leave Dingo and the tiger alive?"

"Right." Rock paused, then let out a low, impatient growl. "Now one of you hurry up and catch me something to eat, so we can get back to camp."

The dingoes growled and paw steps sounded somewhere behind the sand dune. Pricking his ears, Dash listened intently, unable to tell which

way they were heading. Not until Dastarius appeared a few feet away from him, his amber eyes wide with alarm.

“Run!” His father’s shout rang in the air just as a dingo leapt to the top of the sand dune and let out a loud, bloodthirsty howl.

Chapter Twenty-One

Escape

Terror shot through Dash like a jolt of electricity. Scrambling to his paws with a gasp, he leapt away from his hiding place and took off running as fast as he could. Six burly canines streamed over the dune after him, their furious howls bursting through the silence. Tripping over his own paws, Dash staggered wildly toward Dastarius, his heart pounding with fear and his eyes wide with terror. Without warning, a huge canine leapt in front of him, blocking his way and making him skid to an abrupt halt with a loud cry of fear. Gasping, he whirled around, but another dingo lunged to block his exit. On his other side, another pack member leapt forward to block his way. Before Dash could find a way to escape, all six dingoes raced up around him and surrounded him, leaving him trapped in the center of their circle.

Dash froze in place, his amber eyes growing wide with fear. All the fur on his back stood on end and his blood ran cold as he stared at the circle of dingoes surrounding him. Baring their fangs, the dingoes around him growled, a cruel gleam lighting up their eyes. A low, cruel snickering sound made Dash whirl around and freeze in horror.

Rock stood at the very back of the circle, a deadly sneer creeping across his face. "Well, what have we here? It figures Dingo's forest food would be just as nosy as him."

A growl rumbled in Dash's throat and he crouched down, preparing for a fight. In the back of his mind, though, he knew this was a battle he couldn't win. His eyes darted wildly back and forth, searching for any way out, but the pack dogs surrounded him on all sides, blocking his every exit. His desperate gaze flicked to the dark spirit hovering just beyond the deadly circle and locked on his father's cool amber eyes, pleading for help. Dastarius only stared back at him with a dark, stony gaze. There was nothing he could do. All he could do was watch his son get ripped apart.

A shiver raced down Dash's spine. He was on his own...against six dingoes...

Rock snickered and took a step toward him, leering at Dash with glinting dark brown eyes. It took every last bit of strength not to shrink back or look away, but Dash coldly held his gaze, refusing to back down. Lifting his head, he stared defiantly back at Rock, not letting a hint of fear creep into his gaze. There had to be some way out...

Rock narrowed his eyes coolly. "You know Dingo, don't you?"

Dash glared back at him. "Who's asking?"

A faint sneer crept across Rock's face. "The guy who's about to rip your throat out, that's who's asking." His dark brown eyes flashed in the dim light and he stalked dangerously close to Dash. "Why don't you tell me where he is?"

Dash narrowed his eyes and icily met his gaze without flinching. It took all of his willpower not to look away, but he forced himself to keep his eyes locked on Rock. If these were his last hours, he wasn't going to die a coward. "I don't know where he is."

Rock gave him a dangerous glare. "Yes, you do. You know he's out here."

Dash shrugged as lightly as he could. "Maybe I do and maybe I don't. Guess you'll never find out."

Rock's eyes flashed and a deadly growl rumbled in his throat. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm the guy who's about to tear you apart," Dash retorted, lashing his tail.

Rock snorted. "Pretty big talk coming from a starved piece of forest food." Snickering, the Leader gazed at his comrades and opened his mouth to order an attack.

Dash narrowed his eyes, seeing his chance. Before Rock could order his death, he let out a furious snarl and lunged toward the pack Leader. A yelp of surprise escaped Rock's throat as Dash smacked into him and sent him sprawling to the ground. Rock's back slammed against the earth, and Dash didn't waste a minute. Digging his claws into his shoulders, he drove his fangs into his throat, knowing this was his only chance. Salty blood poured into his mouth, but before he could hope that he might somehow kill the pack Leader, Rock's legs slammed into his belly. Snarling, Rock threw

him away with one sharp kick, sending him flying backward with a loud yelp. Pain surged through him when his stomach smacked the ground. Before he could blink, all six dingoes howled with fury and lunged toward him.

Fangs tore into his neck, sending a wave of pain crashing over him. Letting out a yelp, he tore himself away from his attacker and staggered to his paws. Before the dingo could attack again, he swung around to claw his enemy's face. His claws met in flesh, but just as his paw hit the dingo's face, another canine sprang and smacked into his side. A cry of pain tore out of Dash's throat. Claws dug into his side and he squeezed his eyes shut as he collapsed with a painful thud. Opening his eyes, he lashed out and dug his claws into the pack dog's shoulder just as the dingo pinned him down. Kicking up with his back feet, he shoved his attacker away and frantically rolled to the side when the dingo jerked back in pain.

Desperately, he staggered to his paws, but before he could gain his balance, a dingo knocked roughly into his side, sending him stumbling to the ground. Another dog sank his fangs deep into Dash's leg as he started to fall. Pain surged through Dash's body as blood poured out of his leg. With a sharp jerk of his head, the dingo threw him to the side, twisting his leg painfully in his fangs and only letting go when he heard a snap. Agony burned through Dash's bloody leg and a cry tore out of his throat as he smacked the ground. Dizziness swept over him when his head slammed the earth. Through his blurred vision, he looked up just in time to see a burly dog loom over him and aim a brutal punch at his face. With a gasp, Dash rolled away seconds before the dingo's paw struck the place where he had been.

Before he could stagger to his paws, a dingo leapt into the air and slammed down on top of him. Letting out a laugh, the dog drove his claws into Dash's exposed belly. Dash's eyes opened wide and an earsplitting scream tore out of his throat. Agony burned through his body and his vision blurred with pain. Desperately, he tried to wriggle away, but the dingo held him down. Kicking out wildly, he struck the dingo's stomach and sent him staggering back. Before Dash could stand, a clawed paw raked his face, sending him rolling in the other direction. Blood dripped into his eyes, blinding him in a swirl of scarlet gore. In vain, he tried to roll away, but a thick paw slammed down on his chest, holding him in place. Fear shot

through Dash. Desperately, he blinked the blood out of his eyes just in time to see the dingo towering over him lunge toward him and drive his fangs into his neck.

A deafening cry tore out of his throat and his entire body jerked with pain. His claws scraped desperately at the dingo's face, but the fangs never left his neck. Blood poured out over the fur on his chest. The dark, upside-down sand dunes around him blurred. Slowly, his strength started to ebb away. Gasping for breath and tasting blood in the back of his throat, Dash shakily laid his head back, searching desperately for his father. A faint glimmer of hope shone in his eyes when he hazily spotted Dastarius standing several paces away, his face grim and deadly. With dull, dimming amber eyes, he pleaded for his father to help, to do *something. Anything.*

Dastarius's eyes blazed with determination. "Don't just lay there! Fight back!"

Dash shuddered and clawed desperately at the dingo holding him down, but the pack member refused to move. His mouth gaped open and he tried to whisper, "I can't," but no words came out. Blood streamed out of his mouth.

"Yes, you can!" Dastarius snarled, as if reading his mind. His eyes blazed with fury. "Don't be so pathetic! Princess isn't here to save you! You have to save yourself!"

Weak indignation rose in Dash's chest. What did Dastarius expect him to do?

His father heaved a weary sigh. "What if Saderia was here? What if she was being attacked? What if she knew *you* were out there somewhere, looking for her? What would *she* do?"

Dash's eyes opened wide in surprise. Saderia *was* out there somewhere...His own words from the night of the battle echoed in his ears, sending shivers down his spine. "*I'll catch up with you.*" Horror burned in his mind. If he died, Saderia would be crushed...

A sudden burst of strength surged through Dash's bloody body. Gritting his teeth, he kicked up at the dingo with all his strength and shoved him away. A yelp of surprise escaped the dingo's throat as his fangs were torn out of Dash's neck. Dash's vision blurred and a chill swept over him. Had he waited a second longer, he would be dead...Shivering, he spat out a clump of blood and rolled shakily onto his belly to pick himself up.

Dastarius let out a sharp growl just as he rose to his paws. “Stay down!”

Blinking in shock, Dash turned to face him, but didn’t have time to question. A pack member suddenly lunged at him and slammed into his side, sending him tumbling to the ground with a cry of shock. Frantically, he kicked out at the dingo, sending him staggering away. Desperately, he struggled to climb to his paws, but before he could gain his balance, another pack member raced toward him and drove his fangs into Dash’s leg. Snarling viciously, the dingo yanked on his leg to pull him to the ground, but Dash forced himself to remain standing and tried to tear his leg away from the canine’s brutal fangs.

Dastarius’s low growl rumbled over the battlefield. “Don’t fight!”

Shock glimmered in Dash’s eyes and he paused for a split second, then instantly fell still and stopped fighting, hoping his father knew what he was doing. The instant his muscles relaxed, the dingo yanked him roughly to the side and sent both him and the stunned dog tumbling to the ground. His attacker’s fangs left his bloody leg as a cry of surprise tore out of his throat. While his attacker struggled to pick himself up, another dingo soared right over Dash’s head, raising all the fur on his back. In the split-second it took for him to leap to his feet, he realized that if he had kept fighting, the other dog would have barreled right into him.

Dastarius’s voice rang in the air. “Left!”

Without hesitating, Dash leapt to the left, but couldn’t move fast enough. A dingo raced toward him and grabbed his back leg just as he sprang into the air. Pain shot through him when the dingo yanked him backwards, sending him crashing face-first onto the sand. Blood poured out of his leg.

“Turn over!” Dastarius commanded, his voice ringing with determination.

Doubt crept into Dash’s mind. The last thing he wanted to do was expose his belly, but he obeyed without question and instantly rolled over onto his back with as much force as possible.

The jaw of the dingo biting his leg cracked as he sharply twisted his paw out of his fangs. With a harsh cry, the dingo let go and staggered back, his mouth dripping with blood. Out of nowhere, a dingo flew through the air and landed roughly on top of Dash. An eerie light shone in his eyes.

With a cold laugh, he dug his claws into Dash's bloody stomach and ripped open a deep gasp, drawing an ear-piercing shriek out of Dash's throat.

Through the pain stinging his belly and the sound of his scream splitting the air, he heard Dastarius let out a low growl. "Go for his eyes!"

Gritting his teeth, Dash viciously raked his claws across the dingo's blazing eyes. A deafening howl tore out of the dog's chest. His claws instantly left Dash's belly and he stumbled away, yelping in pain. Blood splattered the sand as Dash struggled to stand. Before he could rise to his paws, a pack member soared toward him and struck him hard on the back, sending him tumbling onto his stomach. Claws dug into his shoulders and hot breath breathed on his back. Fangs started to pierce the bloody flesh on the back of his neck.

"Get on your hind paws!" Dastarius's voice boomed over the howls of the dogs.

Instantly, Dash reared back, forcing the pack member to fall to the ground. Dash's front paws flew back toward the ground, but before he could regain his balance, a dog lunged toward him and slammed into his left side, making him stagger to the right.

Dastarius let out a low growl in the distance. "Don't fall!"

Slamming his paws down on the sand, Dash just barely managed to catch himself before he fell. Another dingo leapt toward him, reaching out with thick, bloody claws and aiming for his face. Instantly, Dastarius shouted for him to leap back onto his hind paws. At once, Dash followed his orders and jumped back on his back feet, narrowly missing the dingo's claws as he soared straight past him. Unbalanced, his paws wobbled and before he could stop himself, he stumbled to the ground and landed roughly on his side.

"Don't move!" Dastarius ordered, his voice ringing in Dash's ears.

Every part of Dash screamed for him to stand, but he ignored his instincts and lay rigidly still. A dingo raced at him from the side, baring his fangs and howling with anger.

Dastarius's commanding voice boomed in the air. "Trip him!"

In one quick flash of movement, Dash shot his paws out toward the dingo and swept his legs out from underneath him just as he lunged toward him.

“Roll to the side!” Dastarius shouted. Without questioning, Dash rolled away from the stumbling dingo. Seconds later, he caught sight of another dog racing toward him from the opposite side. Rolling away just in time, he narrowly avoided being tackled by the dingo. With Dash out of the way, the dingo he had tripped stumbled forward and smacked right into the dog that had just missed him, sending them both tumbling to the ground with a yelp.

“Get to your paws!” Dastarius commanded as surprise glimmered in Dash’s eyes.

Instantly, Dash scrambled to his paws and tried not to wince when sand brushed against his wounded, blood-streaked legs. No one tackled him this time.

Dastarius’s triumphant voice split the air. “Run right!”

Dash didn’t need to be told twice. Whipping around, he raced away as fast as his bloody legs would go. The shadowed dunes around him blurred with the blood clouding his eyes, but he didn’t bother to blink it away. Blindly, he raced across the sand, hoping he was running the right way. Howls split the air behind him and paws thundered after him, but Dash never dared to look back. Hot breath breathed on his back as he ran and claws scraped his legs as the dingoes tried to grab him. Tucking his tail tightly between his legs, Dash ran as though the entire world were collapsing behind him.

A shadow swept up on his right as Dastarius fell into step beside him, his black mane billowing out behind him. Pumping his legs frantically, Dash struggled to keep up with him. Pain seared every inch of his body and his muscles screamed in protest. His chest heaved with painful gasps and his throat dripped blood. Sticky gore seeped through his dark brown fur. Tears slipped down his face as he struggled to keep moving. If he got out of this alive, he swore he would never leave Saderia’s side. He would never be nosy. He would never do a single bad thing for the rest of his life if he could just survive this nightmare.

Dark, blurry sand dunes swept past him on either side, shadowed in the blackness of night. Dastarius weaved in and out of tall dunes, leading Dash. Vaguely, Dash heard the dingoes’ howls grow quieter and quieter behind him and heard their paw steps falter, as if in confusion. Even so, he

didn't dare slow down. A shaky gasp shuddered out of his throat and he looked up through blurred vision at his father. "Are...Are they..."

"We haven't lost them yet," Dastarius growled, his eyes focused intently on the land ahead. "We need to get them off our trail." His gaze flicked to his son and a cold gleam lit up his amber irises. "Follow me. Whatever move I make, you do the same. Do *exactly* as I do. And when I say to do something, you don't think, you don't speak, you *do* it."

Dash shuddered and nodded, struggling to speak through his panting. "Okay..."

Whipping around, Dastarius narrowed his eyes at the shadowy land, his amber irises blazing with determination. Picking up his pace, he darted through the dunes, keeping low to the ground in a signal for Dash to do the same. Desperately, Dash crouched down as low as he could and ducked behind a sand dune. His legs burned with pain as he blindly raced from dune to dune and his vision clouded with agony and disbelief. Was *this* the kind of pain Dingo had endured all those years he had lived in the pack?

Dastarius let out a low growl, tearing him out of his thoughts. "When I say so, duck down and roll. Cover yourself in sand."

Horror blazed in Dash's eyes. "What? I...No! The sand will get in the wounds!"

Dastarius's eyes flashed in the dim light. "I don't care. The sand might sting, but it will block the blood flow from your wounds and stop you from leaving a trail of gore. If you ever want to get away from those dingoes, you'll do as I tell you."

Dash's eyes gleamed with horror. Howls rang out behind him, sending shivers down his spine. Shaking with pain and fear, he glanced over his shoulder and shuddered when he saw smudged splotches of blood staining the sand. With every step, he was forming a trail that would lead the dingoes straight to him...Paws thundered far behind him, growing louder and louder every second. A shiver raced down his spine, but he took a deep, shaky breath. "Okay," he whispered, his voice nothing more than a frightened squeak.

Dastarius swerved around a dune, leading Dash along with him. His eyes gleamed in the shadows haunting the desert. "When I say so, dive forward, roll, then stand up and keep running. No pause. No hesitation. Just do it. If you mess this up, you don't stand a chance."

Dash shuddered and took a shaky breath. "Okay...I...I'm ready..."

"Good." In a flash, the spirit ducked behind a dune and let out a roar. "Now!"

Without giving himself time to think, Dash gritted his teeth and dove onto the sandy ground. Not stopping, he rolled around, coating his bloody body in sand. A scream of agony rose in his throat as the gritty grains scraped his bloody sides and seeped into his wounds, but he bit it back. His vision blurred with pain, but he didn't hesitate as he leapt to his paws to race after Dastarius. Agony burned through his entire body. Sand clung to the blood soaking his fur to the point where he nearly blended in with the ground.

Without warning, Dastarius darted behind another dune and Dash stumbled after him. For what felt like hours, his father weaved between dunes, dragging Dash along with him. Dizziness swept over Dash from the constant turns. With the burning pain of his wounds and the blurriness of his vision, all he wanted to do was collapse. Let the dingoes have him. He couldn't take much more anyway. Shaking the thoughts off, he gritted his teeth and kept moving.

The furious howls of the dingoes slowly died away in the silence of night. His paws no longer left a trail of blood and the sand staunched the blood flow. Without a sound, Dash raced after his father until he felt so light-headed he thought he might collapse after all.

After ducking behind a dune, Dastarius skidded to an abrupt halt and looked back at Dash, his amber eyes gleaming. "You can stop now," he growled as Dash stumbled to a halt, his eyes wide with surprise. "We've lost them. But keep quiet just in case."

The instant the words left his mouth, Dash's legs gave out. With a shaky gasp, he collapsed, letting his head fall uselessly to the sand and his paws splay out in all directions. A shudder coursed through his body as all of his muscles went numb at once, leaving him lying helplessly on the sand. He couldn't have moved if his life depended on it.

Heavy pants shuddered out of his chest and tears stung his eyes. Pain seared every inch of his body, making his vision blur. Shakily, he closed his eyes and gasped, trying to force air into his lungs. Dash didn't know how long he lay there, panting and shaking with pain. Hours could have passed, but it might have been just a few minutes. He didn't know how

long Dastarius sat in front of him, watching him without a word. Maybe he did say something, but Dash couldn't hear it through the dizziness clouding his mind.

After what felt like ages, Dastarius rested his tail on Dash's wet, bloody shoulder and let out a soft growl. "You stay here. I'm going to the spirit realm to check our position."

Dash's head shot up in terror and he desperately reached out for his father, forgetting that he couldn't actually touch him. "No!" he choked out. "Don't...Don't go! Please!"

Dastarius narrowed his eyes and Dash flinched, silently cursing himself for his pathetic display. Dread gleamed in his eyes as he gazed up at his father's cool, dark face. Dastarius would leave. He would leave him behind to teach him to be tougher. The painful thoughts swirled through Dash's mind as he stared up at his father, waiting for him to vanish.

Instead of leaving, though, his father simply sat back down and nodded to him, a cool gleam in his eyes. "All right. I'll stay a bit longer while you get control of yourself. Then I'll return to the spirit world to check our position. After that, we can call it a night."

A grateful sigh escaped Dash's throat and his head fell limply to the ground. Closing his eyes, he tried to block out the pain even though he knew he couldn't. Taking a deep breath, he tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart. After several long minutes, he let out a shaky sigh and murmured to Dastarius that he could leave. His words slurred and he didn't know if he had actually spoken aloud or in his head, but when he forced his eyes open, he saw a blurred, hazy version of his father nod, then disappear into the shadows.

Fear shot through Dash, but he simply laid his head back down and sighed, too exhausted to feel afraid. His eyes fluttered shut, but sleep eluded him. Only when his father reappeared beside him did he finally let himself slip into unconsciousness.

"I wonder if..." Saderia broke off with a sharp gasp and froze at the top of a huge, dark sand dune. Dingo and Jeb instantly stopped beside her, their eyes wide with confusion. Shock gleamed in Saderia's amber irises and her mouth gaped open in horror as her gaze swept down to the shadowed land at the base of the sand dune. A bloody, broken body lay at

the bottom of the enormous dune, covered in sand and deep wounds. Even through the sand, she could make out the familiar dark brown color of his fur and mane.

Horror rose in her chest. “*Dash!*” Letting out a gasp, she staggered down the side of the dune, nearly tripping over her paws. A jolt of shock shot through her when she crouched down beside Dash’s body, and her eyes stretched wide with horror. Shakily, she placed a paw on his shoulder and winced at the grisly wounds cut into his legs. Gasps sounded beside her as Dingo and Jeb crept up behind her, their eyes wide with dismay.

Fearful tears glimmered in Saderia’s eyes. “Dash...What happened to you?”

“Time for you to wake up, son.”

Dash’s eyes fluttered open in surprise. Slowly, a familiar clearing swam into view. Shadowed trees rose up around him, towering over him in a canopy of bare, dead branches. Stiff, green grass carpeted the land, seeming soft despite its brittle touch. An eerie light filtered into the clearing. Dastarius sat a few paces away from him, his black-tufted tail curled neatly over his paws and his eyes gleaming in the darkness. For a second, it seemed as if nothing had happened—as if this was just another meeting in the dream clearing.

Dash blinked several times and slowly looked up at Dastarius, his eyes wide with amazement. No wounds covered his body and no pain haunted his limbs. Somehow, he couldn’t feel pain in the dream world like he could in the living world. Feeling a glimmer of gratitude, he gazed up at his father, then froze. A flicker of panic flitted across his face. If Dastarius was here in the dream clearing, who was watching him in the real world?

Before he could voice his worries, Dastarius held up a paw to silence him, his amber gaze calm and knowing. “Don’t worry, Dash. Your body is safe back in the living world. You don’t need me to look out for you anymore. For the time being, that is.”

Dash blinked in bewilderment. Was someone else with him in the real world? He opened his mouth to ask questions, but his father cut him off before he could speak.

“Soon, you will have to wake up, son,” Dastarius growled, his eyes narrowing with a cool, knowing glint. “Real life won’t be as pleasant as this

dream, though. You need to prepare for that. Also...there's something else I need you to do."

Dash frowned and looked up expectantly, his eyes glowing with wonder.

Dastarius coolly met his gaze, his amber eyes dark but calm. "I know you eavesdropped on Rock. I heard the last few things he said—enough to get the gist of what you may have heard. I only ask for one thing...Do not tell Saderia what you heard."

A frown crossed Dash's face and he blinked several times, not understanding. All his memories were a blur of blood and pain, but when he thought back, he vaguely remembered hearing Rock talking to his favorites. The creepy implications of his words sent a chill down his spine when he remembered. At the same time, he felt a flash of surprise when he realized Dastarius hadn't called Saderia 'Princess.' Shaking the thoughts away, he looked up and frowned, his eyes puzzled. "Why shouldn't I tell her?"

Dastarius simply flicked his tail. "Because she'll do something rash. Something that could get you all killed. I can't give you details, so you're just going to have to trust me." His eyes glowed and he steadily met Dash's gaze. "Can you do that?"

Dash stared back up at his father and felt a faint smile creep across his face. Dastarius had saved his life. The least he owed him was his trust. "Yes."

"Dash!" Saderia gave the lion's bloody shoulder a gentle shake, her eyes clouded with fear. Her friend didn't stir. Pain rose in her chest, sending a shiver of fear racing down her spine. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the horrified expression on Jeb's yellow face and the painful gleam in Dingo's light brown eyes as he rested his paw gently on her shoulder. Her eyes focused solely on Dash, though. All that mattered was him.

Dash's chest faintly rose and fell with each hoarse breath he took. His harsh wheezing was the only sign he wasn't dead. If she didn't do something soon, though, he might just end up that way. "There's got to be some way we can help him," she choked out, whipping around to face Dingo with wide, pleading eyes. "We've got to get him to the forest!"

"Then we have to wait for him to wake up." Dingo stared back at her with dark, grave brown eyes. "Dragging him there would only make it

worse.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in horror and dismay. “There’s got to be something we can do! What if...what if he never wakes up?”

Dingo sternly narrowed his eyes. “Don’t think that. Just be patient.”

She lashed her tail in dismay. “How am I supposed to be patient? Look at him!”

Jeb shivered and shrank back near the base of the sand dune. “What happened to him? Why is he covered in sand?” Horror shone in his blue/green eyes and he winced at the sight of Dash’s mangled form, as if it made him sick. “Who did this to him?”

“Dingoes, I’m guessing.” Dingo let out a growl, a shadow darkening his face. “They must have found him. As for the sand, he might have coated himself in it to stop the flow of blood so he wouldn’t leave a trail. I used to do that all the time.”

Surprise shone in Saderia’s eyes. How had Dash known to do that? The dark lion was smart, but he didn’t know the desert well and didn’t know all the little tricks he could use to evade the pack members like Dingo did...Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she leaned over Dash and tried to push back a wave of fear and misery. Gently, she placed a paw on his wet, blood-soaked shoulder and shook him carefully, trying not to hurt him.

“Dash,” she whispered, leaning closer and shivering at the sight of the wounds crisscrossing his cheek. “Dash, it’s me. Please wake up. Please, Dash. We need you...”

Her voice trailed off. Hope shone in her eyes and she held her breath as she stared at Dash’s scarred, bloody face, hoping his eyes would open. Several long minutes dragged by. Not once did Dash stir or open his eyes. A heavy sigh breathed out of Saderia’s chest and she looked away, her heart twisting. Pain rose in her throat and she had to choke back a whimper. Closing her eyes, she stared at her paws and took a deep breath, trying to push away the grief burning in her mind. Why hadn’t she found Dash sooner? Why had she let him get separated from her? How could she have let this happen?

Soft gasps suddenly sounded from Dingo and Jeb, making her eyes fly open in surprise. Instantly, her gaze flicked down to Dash and her heart skipped a beat when his eyelids quivered in his sleep. Slowly, his eyes

fluttered open. Saderia's heart froze in her chest as she stared down at two blank, murky amber eyes.

Dash blinked several times and gazed up at her through blurry eyes, his amber irises gleaming with confusion, as if he couldn't quite understand who she was or what was going on. A faint hint of familiarity crept into his eyes as she stared down at him, hardly daring to breathe. Slowly, he lifted his head to look at her and winced. "S-Saderia?"

Saderia winced at his harsh, rasping voice and shuddered when blood dribbled out of his mouth. With wide eyes, she gazed down at him, hardly daring to breathe. "Dash..."

Pain clouded his amber eyes and confusion flitted across his face. "What... happened?" As soon as the words left his mouth, a flash of shock lit up his face. Memories seemed to flash past his eyes and a shiver raced down his spine. Pain flooded his eyes, but just as suddenly as the memories had shot through his mind, his head shot up in shock. Amazement glowed in his amber irises. "Saderia! You...you found me!"

Saderia managed a tight smile. "Yep. All of us are here—me, Dingo, and Jeb. We're going to help you get back to the forest to get you some help, okay?"

Dash nodded faintly and winced at the movement. "Are you okay?" he choked out, peering up at her through eyes blurred with pain and blood. "Did they get to you, too?"

She blinked in bewilderment. "Who? The dingoes? No, we haven't seen any. We're fine." She paused, then frowned uneasily. "Is that who did this to you? Dingoes?"

Dash shivered and nodded painfully. "There were...six of them," he choked out, coughing up blood. "They tried to kill me...but I managed to... to get away..." He shakily looked up at Saderia, his eyes wide and unfocused. "We're going back to the forest?"

A shiver raced down her spine. *Six* dingoes had tried to kill him? Shaking off her shock, she forced a weak smile. "Yes. Not now, though. You rest for a moment. When you're ready, you can lean on us and we'll help you back to the forest." She paused, then shivered and glanced desperately up at Dingo. "It can't be *that* far away...right?"

Dingo calmly met her gaze and nodded. "It's only a day's walk away. When the outcasts switched camps, they moved toward your forest.

When we ran out of the battle, we ran in the direction of the forest. When Dash ran, he must have gone in a similar direction. Then the route we took to circle around and find him brought us even closer.”

Saderia closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. The thought of helping Dash stumble helplessly through the desert for an entire twenty-four hours seemed horrifying, but it was better than what she expected. “All right.” Taking a deep breath, she glanced at Dash and managed a smile. “See? We’re almost home. We’ll be back in no time.”

A faint smile crept across Dash’s bloody face. “That’s good. In that case, we should probably get going.” Before she could protest, he tried to push himself to his paws, but his scarred legs wobbled beneath him, sending him sprawling back to the ground before he could stand. Pain flashed in his eyes as he hit the ground and a whimper escaped his throat.

Saderia’s eyes flashed and she sternly placed a paw on his sticky, red-speckled back to hold him down. “No, stay there until you’ve regained your strength. Then Dingo and I will help you.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and weakly looked up at her. “I’ve had plenty of time to rest. I can do this. We need to get home *now*.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Dingo rested a paw on her shoulder to stop her. The canine narrowed his eyes firmly. “Let him do it. He’ll be fine with our help.” He paused, then frowned uneasily. “Although...we might have a problem. I know how to get to your forest, but I don’t know how to avoid the dingoes. I don’t know where they are...”

“They’re not out here anymore,” Dash choked out, fighting back a wave of pain. “Most went home. I heard some talking.” Dastarius’s warning words flashed through his hazy mind and he froze, fearing he had said too much. He wasn’t supposed to tell Saderia what the dingoes had said...but telling her he had heard them speak probably wouldn’t hurt. “They’re either home or off hunting outcasts,” he muttered. “I think we’re safe.”

Saderia hesitated, then heaved a sigh and nodded gravely. Her eyes flashed as she gazed around at her friends, flicking her tail impatiently back and forth. “All right, fine. Dingo, get on his right side. I’ll stand on his left. Dash, lean on me when you try to get up. Dingo, as soon as he’s on his paws, press against his other side to hold him up. Jeb, your only job is to stay behind us and keep watch for any sign of dingoes just in case there are still a few out here.” Her eyes flicked up to the star-speckled sky, their

amber depths flashing with hope and determination. “You’re going to be okay, Dash. I promise.”

Hours passed by. Saderia didn’t know how many, nor did she want to know. No one spoke as they crept across the cool, dark sand. The only sound in the tense darkness was Dash’s harsh pants, Dingo’s rasping breath, and Jeb’s nervous paw steps. A dull ache burned in Saderia’s body and her eyelids drooped with exhaustion. All she wanted to do was get home and collapse. Her left shoulder stung after so many hours spent supporting Dash and helping him stumble through the sand. His bloody side pressed up against hers as she struggled to help him keep moving. On his other side, Dingo pressed against him to support him. After so many hours of nearly nonstop traveling, Saderia’s aching paw pads were cracked and bloody. Not once did she complain, though. From the agony written on Dash’s face, she could tell he was in much worse condition than she was.

Her heart ached as she watched Dash struggle to stay on his paws. Even with Saderia and Dingo on either side of him, it was a difficult task. She couldn’t count how many times he had stumbled. His grisly wounds had opened up after so many falls. Blood leaked down his sides and trickled through her own fur, but she ignored it. The blood flow wasn’t severe and he wasn’t leaving a trail. That was all that mattered. Pain glowed in Dash’s eyes as he struggled to keep moving. It seemed to take every bit of his strength to put one paw in front of the other. Saderia’s heart ached and she tried not to shiver.

An entire day had passed by with nothing but traveling. A few times, the four of them had stopped to take a break and let Dash rest, but neither Saderia nor Dingo had slept. While Dash and Jeb slumbered to regain their strength, Dingo had gone out to hunt and check the area for dingoes, bringing back food when he returned. In the meantime, Saderia had paced around their makeshift camps, scanning for any sign of enemies.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, Saderia sighed as she paced over the top of a tall sand dune, blinking to keep her eyes open. Beside her, Dash stumbled along tiredly, his head drooping. On his other side, Dingo merely faced forward and pressed close to Dash to hold him up. Behind them, Jeb trailed along nervously, casting anxious glances out at the shadowy desert. Blearily, Saderia looked up through blurred eyes and felt

her mouth gape open in disbelief. Instantly, all her tiredness left her and a surge of hope shot through her, lighting up her amber eyes. Just a few feet in front of her sat her old forest.

Sparse grass sprung up from the sand just a few paces away. Tall trees rose up on the outskirts of the forest, reaching out toward them with shadowed leaves rustling in a breeze. Silver moonlight shone down on the dark forest, as if lighting the way. Excitement glowed in Saderia's eyes and she pressed closer to Dash, as if reassuring him that it would be okay. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a smile creep across Dingo's face.

Picking up her pace, she practically fell down the side of the dune, half-carrying Dash, while Dingo kept pace with her, keeping Dash up. Behind them, Jeb scrambled to keep up, his blue and green eyes widening with wonder. Hope burned in Saderia's heart as images of her old home flashed through her mind. Her father, Cia, Uncle Jash, the town, the dirt path, her home, her room, a place where Dash could be safe...

Hope glowed in her eyes the instant her paws touched the soft, cool grass. Moving as quickly as possible while still holding Dash up, she raced into the familiar woods and darted through the shadowy trees. Hours dragged by as the four of them crashed through the thick, dark undergrowth, stumbling around trees and pushing through dense bushes. Dingo muttered the whole time, while Saderia remained silent, determined to get home.

After what felt like years, the four of them staggered out of the dense woods into a wide clearing. Dirt and leaves covered their fur and weeds coiled around their paws, but Saderia barely noticed. Looking up, she felt her heart soar as she took in the dim clearing. Her local town spread out around her, as quaint and welcoming as she remembered. Dozens of dark, small shops covered the grass. The library, the book store, the grocery store, and so many other shops rose up around her. Darkness covered the insides of the stores and 'Closed' signs hung on the doors, but even abandoned, the shops seemed welcoming.

Unlike the last time she had returned to the forest, all of the shops were just as she remembered. No longer were they destroyed. No more fallen trees littered the town square, no more holes covered the shop roofs, no more 'For Sale' signs hung on the doors, no more cracks shattered their windows, and no more disarray haunted the town. Everything had been repaired. For the first time in a long time, the town seemed peaceful.

Blinking back tears of joy, Saderia swung around to face the shadowed dirt path branching off of the town. Instantly, she started toward it, dragging Dash along with her and making sure Jeb followed close behind.

Dingo pricked his ears as he helped guide Dash's limp, barely-awake body onto the path. "This leads to your house, right?"

Saderia nodded, her eyes glowing through the darkness. They were home. Really, truly home. Soon, Dash would be safe!

Tiredly, Dash lifted his head and gazed up at her through blurry amber eyes. "You run ahead and let Makero know we're back," he choked out tiredly. "We'll follow you."

Saderia narrowed her eyes uncertainly and hesitated. "Are...Are you sure?"

Dash managed a weak smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Dingo won't drop me. He's not that much of a jerk."

A faint grin crossed Dingo's face and he chuckled softly. "Go on ahead, Saderia. You heard him. I'm not that much of a jerk."

Behind them, Jeb looked up cautiously. "I...I can help him a little, too."

Saderia hesitated, then gave them a weak nod. Pausing on the edge of the dirt path, she cautiously stepped away from Dash, while the dark lion leaned on Dingo to support himself. Nervously, Jeb crept up behind Saderia and pressed up against Dash's bloody side when she crept away. The tiny creature wasn't quite big enough to hold him up completely, but he was tall enough to keep him from stumbling too much.

Stepping away, Saderia watched them for a long moment, then whirled around and took off running as fast as she could, determined to get home. Her heart soared with hope as she raced along the shadowy path. The darkened woods on either side of her flew past her in a blur of darkness. Wind rustled her fur as her bloody paws flew along the trail and her tail streamed out behind her. In the distance, her house rose up from a copse of trees, welcoming her home.

Gasping for breath, she darted across the shadowy clearing and burst through the door into her house. Her paws skidded to an abrupt halt on a smooth wooden floor free of debris. Clean walls free of holes greeted her, along with mended ceilings and unbroken windows. New, dirt-free furniture

filled the front room and a clean, unmarred archway glistened on the back wall. Tears glimmered on the edges of Saderia's eyes. It was her home...the same pristine home she had left behind so many months ago.

Frantic paw steps thudded somewhere in the left hallway, dragging Saderia out of her thoughts. Looking up sharply, she felt a surge of excitement and hope shoot through her when she realized who was making the sounds. "Dad!"

Seconds after she spoke, Makero burst out from the left hallway and skidded to a halt on the wood floor, his green eyes wide with alarm. Shock lit up his emerald irises the instant he caught sight of her and he froze in place, his mouth gaping open in disbelief. "S-Saderia?" His voice came out as a shaky whisper and he blinked several times, as if unable to believe his eyes. Shaking his head, he gaped in disbelief, then let out a shout of amazement. "Saderia! It's *you*! It's really *you*!" Shaking out of his shock, he lunged toward her and nearly knocked her to the ground as he pressed against her and nuzzled her head. "I thought I was hearing things, but it's you! It's really *you*! You're back!"

A warm smile crossed Saderia's face. "Yes, I'm back, Dad. We're all back."

Hope shone in his green eyes and he pulled away from her just enough to meet her gaze. "So Dash and the others...?"

Saderia nodded. "They're here. They sent me ahead. They'll be here soon..."

Quick paw steps sounded behind her the instant the words left her mouth. Whirling around, she looked back just in time to see Dingo slump through the open doorway, supporting Dash's weak, bloody body, while Jeb peeked in curiously from behind them. Dingo looked up tiredly as he stumbled onto the clean floor, a weak smile on his face. Tiredly, Dash lifted his head and managed a faint smile before his head drooped back onto his chest.

Following her gaze, Makero gaped at the three friends in shock, then let out a gasp at the sight of Dash's mangled, bloody form. "What...What happened?" he choked out.

Saderia narrowed her eyes in determination. "It doesn't matter. Listen, Dad, Dash will be fine, but we need someone to help him. Can you send for a healer, like Maeta?"

Makero nodded hastily. Tearing his eyes off his adopted son, he whipped around to face the left hallway, his irises gleaming with determination. "Cia! Jash!" he shouted. "Come out here! Quickly!"

Somewhere in the hallway, a door creaked open and hesitant paw steps thudded across the wood floor. Cautiously, Cia and Uncle Jash poked their heads out around the side of the hallway, their blue eyes clouded with confusion. Shock and recognition glowed in their eyes the instant they caught sight of Saderia and her friends. Letting out gasps of amazement, they flew out of the hallway and raced to stand on either side of Makero.

"Saderia!" Cia exclaimed, her tone betraying her surprise.

Uncle Jash blinked at her in shock. "You're back!"

A faint smile crept across Saderia's face. "We promised we would be."

Uncle Jash blinked in amazement and opened his mouth to speak, then broke off when Cia let out a horrified scream. Saderia's aunt gaped at Dash, her blue eyes wide with horror and disbelief. A shiver raced through her as she stared at his grisly wounds.

"What...what happened?" she stammered. "Dash, you look awful!"

Uncle Jash's mouth gaped open in shock. "What *did* happen?"

Saderia lashed her tail impatiently. "It doesn't matter..."

Makero narrowed his eyes sternly. "Cia, Saderia thinks Dash will be fine..."

Cia lashed her tail and shot him a glare. "Well, she's not a doctor!"

"Which is why we need a doctor's opinion," Makero replied, his voice calm and firm. "I need you to run to the Home of the Leopards and ask Maeta to come back here to help him. Tell her to bring as many herbs as possible."

Cia shivered, but nodded quickly, trying to hide the terror in her eyes. "Okay," she stammered, taking a shaky breath. "Okay..."

Makero narrowed his eyes and cast a firm glance at Saderia's uncle. "Jash, you go with her. The faster you get Maeta here, the better."

Uncle Jash nodded seriously and turned to walk toward the open door, leading Cia along with him. Together, the two of them raced out into the dark clearing and bounded toward the dirt path as fast as their paws could carry them.

Makero let out a sigh and gazed tiredly at Saderia. "Let's bring him to his room."

When Saderia nodded, he glanced up at Dingo and Jeb and smiled gratefully when they both nodded to show that they would help. Instantly, Saderia whirled around and stepped toward Dash, taking Jeb's place at his side when the creature stepped back. With Dingo's help, she helped Dash stumble after Makero into the narrow hallway leading to their rooms. Jeb followed anxiously behind them, his blue/green eyes wide with worry. The King shoved open the door to Dash's old blue room and instantly stepped back to let Saderia, Dash, and Dingo squeeze through the doorway. A glimmer of satisfaction and happiness glowed in Saderia's eyes as she took in the clean room and new furniture. Just like the main room, Dash's room was in the same perfect condition she remembered.

Makero swept around the other side of the huge blue bed and pulled back the blanket while Saderia and Dingo helped Dash stumble to the edge of the bed. Slowly, she and her canine friend hoisted Dash up and helped him climb up onto the mattress. A heavy sigh of relief escaped Dash's throat as he laid his head down on the soft fabric. His eyes fluttered shut as the rest of his scarred body went numb with relief.

A relieved sigh escaped Saderia's throat. Tiredly, she leaned against the side of Dash's bed. Beside her, Jeb nearly collapsed on the ground, his eyes dull with exhaustion. Dingo merely sat back and watched Dash calmly, hiding his weariness. Taking a deep breath, Saderia let her eyes slip shut in relief. They were safe. In just a few moments, Maeta would arrive to heal Dash's wounds. He would be safe. All of them would be safe. All of them were finally home...

Her eyes fluttered open when a soft paw brushed her shoulder. Makero sat down close beside her and gently curled his tail around her. A faint smile crossed his face, but when she looked up into his shadowed green eyes, she could read the sadness in his emerald gaze. A million questions hid behind his weak smile, but one of them seemed clear in his dull green eyes: Where was Karenisha?

Guilt burned in Saderia's chest and she quickly looked away, trying not to wince. The sole reason she had gone on her journey had been to find her mother, but she had gotten sidetracked too many times. Now she was

home again, but Karenisha was still missing. And now Dash was wounded, too. She had accomplished nothing.

Pain stung her heart and she closed her eyes. Being home had felt like a miracle at first. Seeing her old town and her home once again in perfect condition had made it seem as if everything was exactly the same as when she had left it so long ago. But it wasn't the same. She might be back in her true home, but Karenisha was still missing.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Last Resort

“We cannot go on like this!” Thunder’s strong voice rang out through the desert. Every outcast in the huge crowd before him looked up in shock, their eyes wide with surprise. Deep scars covered their gaunt sides and blood clung to their ragged fur. Fire burned in Thunder’s dark brown eyes and he gritted his teeth in determination as he gazed out at his huge, makeshift pack. “That tiger, Saderia, was right! She told me this was no way to live, and she was right. We cannot go on living like this. We have to stand up to Rock!”

The silence was deafening.

Every outcast stared up at him in bewilderment without saying a word, as if not quite comprehending what he had said. At the sight of Thunder’s deathly serious face, a current of fear and shock swept through the enormous crowd of skinny canines. Anxious whispers rose up from the crowd, growing louder and louder every second. Panic spread through the camp like a disease until fear glowed in the eyes of every outcast. Within seconds, dingoes started shouting across the camp and demanding answers from Thunder, their eyes wild with terror. Some even started to flee from camp.

Thunder heaved a sigh and felt his heart sink. Taking a deep breath, he tried to speak, to calm them down and get them to accept his ideas as hundreds of Leaders had done in the past. When he opened his mouth, though, no words came out. Thunder gritted his teeth and winced, trying to calm himself down. The outcasts’ fate rested solely on his shoulders, and if he couldn’t even calm them down, he was destined to fail them. What kind of Leader couldn’t even get his pack under control? Flinching, he took a deep breath and tried to calm the wild beating of his heart. He hated being the outcasts’ Leader. Leaders were supposed to know all the answers, but he had no idea what to do.

Letting out a sigh, he gritted his teeth, then let out a shaky howl. “Everyone calm down! Listen to me!” His desperate voice echoed out over the desert. Slowly, each outcast began to quiet and gradually turned to face him. Legions of wide, terrified eyes bored into him, searching for guidance, answers, help, solace...everything he alone couldn’t give them.

Thunder took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he faced his outcasts. “Listen up! Unless we do something, Rock is just going to keep killing us! Think of how many of us Rock killed in that battle alone. We can’t go on like this, waiting for him to pick us off one by one. We’ve got to do *something* to stop him!”

Silence. All of the outcasts stared up at him with wide, horrified eyes.

One let out a frightened howl. “Like what? What are we supposed to do? Rock’s got hundreds of followers! We’ve got nothing! There’s no way we can stop him!”

“Yeah, what good will standing up to him do?” another outcast shouted in a rough, hoarse voice. “We’re already dying. We’ll just die more if we stand up to him. What? Do you just want to speed up the process or something?”

Other outcasts howled their agreement, their eyes wide with panic and fear.

Thunder heaved a long sigh. Before they could work themselves up into a frenzy, he let out a long howl and waited as each of the outcasts grew silent. When a tense quiet covered the land, Thunder gazed back at the crowd as steadily as he could. “You’re right. All of you.” That surprised them. He could read the shock gleaming in their eyes. Hiding his own unease, he faced the outcasts as calmly as possible. “That’s why we need *help*.”

Silence greeted his words. Every outcast stared at him blankly, not understanding.

“Where are we going to get help?” someone shouted.

Thunder took a deep breath and forced himself to speak. “From the forest.”

The entire camp seemed to erupt at his suggestion. Shocked gasps, derisive snorts, and howls of protest rose up from the crowd of outcasts.

Shouts rang out through the desert as every outcast clamored to be heard over the yells of their neighbors.

Struggling to be heard, Thunder raised his voice to a loud shout. “Listen to me! Dingo lives with his new friends in the forest. Did you see how well-fed they all were?”

An outraged snarl rose up from one of the outcasts in the crowd. “Are you saying we should go live with the forest food? No thanks! If I’m going to die, it’s going to be in my home—the desert! Who’s with me?”

Howls of agreement burst out from the crowd as every outcast shouted their own protests. Desperately, Thunder held up a paw to try to calm them, but the crowd refused to quiet. Helplessness gleamed in Thunder’s eyes as rows upon rows of outcasts leapt to their paws, threw back their heads, and howled with fury and indignation. Already, most of them were turned against the idea. How could he show them that this was the only way?

Gritting his teeth in a sudden flash of anger and desperation, Thunder let out a furious howl. “*Quiet!* Can’t you see this is all we’ve got? This is our only hope! This is our last chance at survival!” His dark brown eyes gleamed with desperation as he stared at his outcasts. “Did you see how those two forest animals treated us? Even after the way we treated them, they were kind to us. The same goes for Dingo. We treated him like dirt, yet he risked his life to save us. We tried to kill *all* of those animals, yet they treated us with kindness. Listen!” he shouted when a few soft murmurs breathed through the silence of the crowd. “The forest animals have their own kind of society, and it seems a lot more civilized than the pack’s. The forest animals *help* each other. The forest took in Dingo and that strange Jeb creature—outsiders! Dingo and the forest animals even fought for us in that battle before I convinced them to run!”

Thunder’s dark brown eyes blazed in the harsh light of the sun. “The forest animals are strong and well-fed. And they are only hope! We can’t just keep living in fear and starving while Rock dreams up new ways to torture us. Not when there’s another way! We *need* help! All of you need to suck up your pride and admit it. And if we’re going to get help from anyone, it will be from the forest animals.”

No one said a word. Every outcast exchanged an uneasy glance with their neighbors, as if trying to see what everyone else was thinking. A few

thoughtful murmurs spread through the crowd and a wondering gleam crept into the eyes of the outcasts. Relief rose in Thunder's chest when he realized they were considering the idea.

Several tense moments passed as the outcasts shifted nervously and muttered to one another. After a long moment, one tired voice rose up among the rest. "What makes you think the forest animals are going to help us? I mean, yeah, a few of them came and gave us some food and helped us out a bit, but what makes you think the rest of them are going to be like that?"

Thunder narrowed his eyes and gazed solemnly out at the crowd. "Because that tiger—Saderia—is the forest's Leader."

Gasps broke out in the crowd the instant the words left his mouth. Stunned expressions of wonder and amazement flickered across the faces of the outcasts. Shocked, every one of them stared up at Thunder in incredulity as he opened his mouth to speak.

"I was talking to her before," Thunder explained, facing the outcasts with a grave, determined expression. "She told me that she and her family rule the forest. Dingo is a close friends of hers—which means he's a close friend of the forest's Leader, of royalty." His eyes shone in the harsh light. "Dingo has already shown us that he wants to help us, so maybe...just maybe...he'll be able to talk Saderia into doing something to save us. And since Saderia's the forest Leader, she could get the rest of the forest animals to help us!"

Silence followed his words. Every outcast stared up at him in shock, their mouths gaped open in wonder and their eyes wide with incredulity.

"Dingo actually managed to get in a Leader's good graces?" someone shouted.

A few guilty snickers spread through the crowd, but most outcasts remained frozen in place, staring at Thunder with stunned eyes. A hint of hope crept into their shocked gazes.

Thunder silently let out the breath he had been holding. Somehow, he had managed to get them to warm up to the idea. Taking a deep breath, he faced the ragged crowd of outcasts sternly, his eyes narrowed in an expression of deathly seriousness. "The forest animals are the only animals in the world who would even *consider* helping us. I'm not saying that they're definitely going to do it, but there's no harm in asking. If we're ever

going to have a life again, we need to stand up to Rock, and in order to do that, we need greater, stronger numbers. The forest can give us that. If it comes to a battle, the forest animals will give us an advantage. They are not as weak as we once thought. Their Leader herself is as strong as any dingo.” Thunder’s eyes shone with hope. “If everyone agrees, I can send someone to the forest to ask for help, and then we’ll see what happens.” He paused, then faced the outcasts, an anxious look flitting across his face. “So...who’s with me?”

No one spoke. Several moments of silence passed over the camp. Slowly, a few thoughtful whispers spread through the crowd. The outcasts cast wondering glances at one another, seeming to consider the idea. On the edge of the crowd, Thunder’s burly dark brown Second in Command, Brawny, gazed at the outcasts with a thoughtful but unreadable expression. After a long hesitation, he rose to his paws and gazed calmly up at Thunder. “I am.” Flicking his tail, he gazed at the crowd with a challenge in his eyes. “Anyone else?”

Silence filled the air. After several long heartbeats of tense quiet, a hesitant voice spoke up from the middle of the crowd. “I...I guess I am...”

“Hey, it can’t hurt,” another dingo called lightly. “So...why not? I’m in!”

Gradually, other voices rose up from the crowd. A wave of excitement spread through the camp as outcasts eagerly turned to each other, speaking in voices tinged with excitement. Howls of approval broke out until every outcast shouted in agreement.

A faint smile spread across Thunder’s face and a wave of relief swept over him. Maybe this could actually work...

Keeping his expression as calm and steady as possible, he faced the crowd and dipped his head. “I’m glad you all agree. I’ll send two dingoes to the forest to ask for help. The rest of you stay here and just do what we do every day—hunt and keep an eye out for pack members.” Flicking his tail, he signaled for the crowd to disperse. Slowly, the crowd began to break apart as the outcasts spread out into camp, chatting excitedly with their neighbors and filling the camp with a soft, lively murmur.

Thunder watched the dingoes spread out through the camp, his eyes searching for two canines in particular. His gaze landed on two outcasts sitting near the edge of camp, talking quietly amongst themselves.

Narrowing his eyes in determination, Thunder pushed his way through the thick crowds of canines and made his way over to them.

One of the skinny outcasts looked up as he approached. Surprise shone in his yellow eyes and his dark red ears pricked up in curiosity. “Thunder? What do you want with us?”

The yellow orange dingo beside the lanky red outcast looked up sharply, his yellow eyes wide with surprise.

Thunder sat back in front of the two outcasts and curled his tail calmly over his paws. “I want you two to be the ones to ask the forest animals for help.”

The red dingo’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in shock. “Us? Why us? We’re the last dingoes we thought you’d send!”

Thunder faced him with a calm, serious expression. “And why is that? It seems to me that you two would be the best ones to send. After all, you were close to Dingo.”

The red, scarred canine raised an eyebrow. “If by close, you mean close enough to kick him while he was down, then yes, we were very close to him.” The outcast shook his head in disbelief. “We treated him like dirt, Thunder.”

“Well, *you* did,” the orange dog cut in, eyeing him mutinously. “I kept out of it.”

The red one shot him a glare. “Why don’t you keep out of *this*? I didn’t mean ‘we’ as in you and me, anyway. I meant me and...”

“I know who you meant,” Thunder interrupted, heaving a long sigh. “And yes, you were pretty mean to him, but so were the rest of us. There’s not a dingo in this camp who can say they were never cruel to Dingo. His blood is on all of our paws.”

“I was a *lot* meaner,” the red one countered, shooting him a dark glare. “Meaner than everyone in this camp combined.”

Thunder sighed. “Maybe. Still, no matter how bad things got between you and Dingo, he still cared about you. He’ll *want* to help you—even after everything you did. Besides, I’m sure every once in a while, you did something nice for him. You’re not that bad.”

The red outcast raised an eyebrow, then heaved a long, weary sigh. “Fine,” he muttered. “What do you want us to do?”

Thunder's gaze hardened with seriousness. "I want you to go to the forest and get someone's attention. When someone finds you, be nice and ask to see Dingo. He'll come, and with any luck, he'll bring his friends. As soon as they meet you, tell them what's been going on, tell them about my plan, then ask them for help. And don't forget to be nice."

The red dingo let out a sigh. "All right, Thunder. If you really think this will work, I'll go. I just don't know how Dingo will react to seeing us again."

A faint smile crossed Thunder's face. "I'm sure he'll be shocked at first. But then he'll probably be delighted."

"That's some story." Makero stared absently at the golden dining table, his green eyes pale and clouded with thought. The King sat silently in the new chair pulled up to the side of the table, lost in thought over the story Saderia had just finished telling him. On either side of him sat Cia and Uncle Jash. After hearing Saderia's painful story, Cia's stricken face seemed so pale and horrified, she looked almost faint. Uncle Jash merely stared uncomprehendingly at Saderia, bewildered over everything he had heard.

Saderia sat across from her father on the other side of the golden table, her amber eyes narrowed with seriousness. Dash sat in the chair right next to her, his tail wrapped weakly around hers. Grisly scars marred his messy dark brown fur, but his eyes glowed with life. Only four days had passed since Saderia and her friends had returned home. Late on their first night home, Maeta had made it to their house and had taken care of Dash's injuries. Already, Dash was doing better. Most of his grisly wounds had closed up and the majority of his pain had faded away. Lately, he had been able to walk without needing anyone's help.

Glancing at Dash out of the corner of her eye, Saderia gave him a faint smile, then gazed back at her father and aunt and uncle. Since the sun had risen that morning, she and Dash had been telling their family the story of their journey. Normally, Saderia would have waited for Dingo and Jeb to join them, but Dingo had holed himself up in his den and Jeb's parents had refused to let their son out of their sight. The last time she had seen either of them was two days ago when she had traveled to their homes to let them know that Dash was doing better. Since then, they hadn't gotten a chance to see each other. If she didn't think it would worry her father so much,

Saderia would have crept over to their homes to talk to them, but she was too afraid her father would suspect them of conspiring against him and planning another trip. Their homecoming was tense enough without that.

Cia looked up uncertainly, her blue eyes clouding with pain and curiosity. She bit her lip, as if debating whether or not to speak, then blurted out the words all in one quick breath. “Did you ever find out anything about where Karenisha might be?”

Saderia winced and glanced guiltily down at her paws. “No,” she murmured, her voice soft and her eyes refusing to meet theirs. No, she hadn’t brought Karenisha back to her family, nor had she gathered any useful information. Although...she *had* stumbled upon *something* out in the desert. Something strange and awful was happening out in the land of endless sand, but whether that had anything to do with her mother, she didn’t know. Still...something was off. It felt as if she was on the brink of uncovering the truth, but something was missing. Some important piece of the puzzle was just out of her reach.

Frustration rose in her chest. Part of her longed to be back out in the desert with the outcasts, figuring out what was happening and putting the puzzle pieces in place, but she knew she couldn’t. Besides, she wasn’t sure where to go from there, anyway. Until she figured out what was missing—or at least came up with a plan for her next move—she was better off staying home and not saying anything to her family. Sometimes ignorance was bliss, after all.

Makero sighed, drawing her out of her thoughts. The King gazed tiredly at his paws, his eyes dull with disappointment. “So your whole journey was...unsuccessful...”

Saderia flinched and heaved a long sigh, trying not to let his words get to her. The truth of those words hurt. Granted, her journey had given her a few leads and the chance to help the outcasts...until the pack’s bloody invasion. Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she tried to ignore the frustration and disappointment in her heart. Instead, she tried to focus on figuring out what to do next. Figuring out her next move and uncovering the ‘missing piece’ was what was important, anyway. She wouldn’t let herself fail again.

Makero took a deep breath, his green eyes dull and dark. “Oh well...I guess if there’s nothing you can do, then there’s just nothing you

can do...”

Saderia’s eyes blazed and her ears flattened in indignation. “Mom’s not *dead*. There’s still *something* I can do. I just don’t know what...yet.”

Makero sternly narrowed his eyes. “If you’re suggesting going on another journey...”

“Relax, Dad.” Saderia let out a sigh, a hint of bitterness creeping into her tone. “I wasn’t planning on running away anytime soon. You probably don’t believe me, but you can at least believe that I won’t leave until Dash is fully recovered.”

Makero narrowed his eyes uncertainly, then merely nodded and sighed. “All right. I guess that’s...good?”

Saderia let out a soft breath. “Sorry, Dad. I don’t mean to snap at you. I just wish I could have done this right. All I did was mess everything up.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise and his tail tightened around hers. “You didn’t mess anything up, Saderia. Things just got out of control. We had no way of dealing with everything that happened. If it were possible, we would have brought Karenisha back.”

Saderia let out a long sigh and nodded dully. “I suppose you’re right. We really didn’t stand a chance back there.” Her amber eyes glinted with a sudden flash of determination. “But things change.”

Makero flattened his ears. “You’re not going back out there...”

“You’re right,” Saderia interrupted, glancing at him with calm amber eyes. “I’m not. At least not until I’ve got everything figured out. I won’t leave until I know what I’m doing this time.” Her eyes flicked to Dash and a hint of pain burned in their amber depths. “I’m not going to risk it all on a theory. Dash could have died out there. I’m not going to risk that happening again until I’m sure I’ve got all the facts.”

Makero studied her intently, then gave her a slight nod. “All right.” He paused, then took a deep breath and gazed around at the room with a faint smile. “So...what do you think? While you were gone, I managed to get the forest back on its feet. Does everything look all right?”

A brilliant smile spread across Saderia’s face. “It’s exactly as I remember.”

The King tiredly returned the smile. “I’m glad.”

Her eyes shone with gratitude. "I'm glad you took good care of the forest while I was gone. Thank you." She paused and started to say more, then broke off and looked up sharply when a soft knocking sound drifted over to her ears.

All eyes turned toward the front door as it creaked open a crack. Light spilled in through the crack until Dingo poked his head around the corner, his light brown eyes cautious.

"Am I interrupting anything?" he called.

A faint smile crossed Saderia's face. "No, Dingo, it's okay. You can come in." Her eyes flicked hopefully to her father. "Right, Dad?"

The King nodded and grinned. "Come on in!"

Dingo dipped his head in respect, then pushed the door open and stepped into the house. Jeb followed close behind him, glancing nervously at the King and shutting the door carefully behind him. Side by side, the two padded across the smooth wood floor of the front room through the shining archway into the dining room. At a nod from Saderia, Dingo leapt into the chair beside her, while Jeb jumped into the chair beside Dash.

Saderia grinned as they settled down on the fancy seats. "I haven't seen you guys in a while."

Dingo shrugged absently. "I figured I'd hibernated enough the last few days. Jeb's parents finally decided to let him go out to talk to me, too, as long as I promised to keep an eye on him, so I thought I'd bring him over here to see what you guys were up to. How are you, by the way?" he added, casting a curious glance at Dash.

Dash managed a weak smile. "Good. Better." Gratitude glimmered in his eyes. He hadn't forgotten how Saderia and Dingo had practically carried him back to the forest. "I barely even feel the pain of these scars anymore. Maeta's herbs really did the trick."

Dingo grinned. "That's good. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Me too," Jeb spoke up, casting an anxious glance at Dash and smiling a weak smile. "I was kind of scared you weren't going to make it."

"I wouldn't have, if not for you guys," Dash replied, grinning at his three friends. In his mind, he silently thanked his father, as well. After all, if it wasn't for Dastarius, he wouldn't have lived long enough for his friends to save him.

Saderia smiled and flicked him lightly with her tail, her eyes glowing with happiness and relief. She opened her mouth to say something, then broke off when another hesitant knock on the door floated over to her ears. A frown spread across her face and her eyes narrowed in confusion as she turned to gaze out at the sunlit front room. Who could possibly be at the door? Her friends and family looked up curiously at the door, their expressions just as puzzled as hers.

“Come in,” Makero called, his voice tinged with confusion.

The door swung open and an unfamiliar cheetah nervously poked his head around the corner. A dark sense of fear and unease glimmered in the cheetah’s blue eyes. After a moment of hesitation, he slowly crept into the house and padded through the main room to stand in the archway in front of the royal family. Instantly, he lowered his head and bowed before gazing up at them with wide, nervous eyes and fearfully bristling fur.

Makero frowned in confusion. “Why are you here?”

The cheetah shivered nervously and cast an anxious glance at Dingo before quickly turning back to face the King. “King Makero...I...I didn’t know what to do, so I came to you for help. I was out with some friends when we came upon these two...animals on the edge of the forest. They... they looked like him,” he added, pointing nervously at Dingo.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock and Dash’s mouth gaped open in disbelief. Fear gleamed in Jeb’s eyes, while Dingo raised an eyebrow, his expression stunned. With a soft gasp, Saderia leapt out of her chair and practically cornered the cheetah against the side of the archway, her amber eyes blazing with unease and curiosity.

“What are dingoes doing in the forest?” she demanded, her orange fur bristling.

The cheetah nervously backed away, his eyes wide with fear and uncertainty. “I...I don’t know. But they kept asking for him,” he stammered, glancing at Dingo. “And you, too, Princess Saderia.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. What were dingoes doing in the forest? Why would they be asking for her? And whose side were they on?

Dash narrowed his eyes in unease, as if reading her thoughts. “Do you think Thunder sent them?”

Dingo narrowed his eyes, his light brown irises shadowed with pain. “Is Thunder even still alive?”

Jeb winced and looked nervously down at his paws, his eyes clouded with unease and discomfort.

Beside him, Dash shrugged and looked away uncomfortably. "I suppose it's possible. I mean, I'm sure some of the outcasts survived. Maybe Thunder was one of them. Maybe he sent them here."

Jeb frowned in bewilderment. "But why?"

Slowly, Saderia turned back to face them, a shadow flitting across her face. A dark sense of dread and unease crept into her mind. "What if they're not outcasts? What if they're some of Rock's followers? Or even Rock himself with one of his confidants?"

Tense silence fell over her friends.

Dash swallowed nervously and tried not to shiver, but couldn't stop the dark fur on his back from bristling in unease. He wanted to believe he wasn't afraid of Rock, but no matter how much he tried to convince himself he wasn't scared, he was. The last thing he wanted was another run-in with the violent dingo Leader...

Dingo narrowed his eyes skeptically, but couldn't hide a gleam of unease. "What would one of Rock's followers be doing here? They all avoid the forests like the plague."

"I don't know," Saderia murmured, her eyes clouding. In the back of her mind, though, she knew that was a lie. She did know...or at least, she had an idea. Memories of her eerie Dreams flitted through her mind, sending a shiver down her spine. A shadow flitted across her face. "It's a possibility, though. After all, Rock saw you in that fight, Dingo, and he must know you live here."

Dingo groaned in frustration. "What does he want with me now?"

"I don't know, but Rock seems to really want you dead," Saderia warned, her voice soft and grave. "I don't know what he and his followers could gain by coming to the forest, but it could very well be them."

Dash narrowed his eyes and lashed his tail, trying to hide his fear. "So what if it is Rock's followers? It's our job to drive them out if it is. After all, this is *our* forest. We shouldn't be afraid of him in our own home."

Dingo icily flicked his tail. "Fear him as much or as less as you like, but he's still dangerous."

“Exactly.” A dark sense of dread and unease clouded Saderia’s eyes. “It could be Rock’s followers...but what I don’t get is why they’re asking for *me*.”

Jeb frowned, his eyes narrowing with confusion. “That *is* kind of odd. Rock doesn’t really know you, right? He only knows you hang around with Dingo.”

Dash nodded absently, but said nothing. A shadow fell across his face and a dark shiver of cold swept over him. A dangerous memory nagged at the back of his mind. What was it Rock had said to his favorites that shadowy night when he had almost been killed? “*Kill the others, but leave Dingo and the tiger alive.*” The evil pack Leader had claimed that Dingo was ‘a key player in his plan,’ and that he needed Saderia alive, too. And now dingoes had shown up in the forest asking for Dingo and Saderia. Fear flitted across Dash’s face. This couldn’t be good...

His eyes narrowed with unease and flicked anxiously back and forth between his three friends. Part of him wanted to break his promise to Dastarius and tell them what he had heard, but something kept him quiet. His father’s eerie words echoed in his mind. “*She’ll do something rash. Something that could get you all killed. You’re just going to have to trust me...*” A shiver raced down Dash’s spine. Whatever Dastarius thought would happen, it didn’t seem good. Maybe it was best to keep his mouth shut and see what happened...

Saderia let out a long sigh, drawing him out of his thoughts. “Well, what do you think?” she muttered, gazing around at her friends. “Are they Thunder’s friends, or Rock’s?”

Makero narrowed his eyes uneasily and spoke up before any of them could say a word. “Wait a minute,” he murmured, his voice thick with confusion. “What’s going on? Who are Thunder and Rock, and why would they send someone here?”

Saderia let out a soft breath. “Remember what I told you about the outcasts? They have a Leader named Thunder. As for Rock, he’s the newest Leader of the pack. He took over after Dingo killed Bone. Rock’s been after Dingo for a long time and he’s attacked the outcasts, as well, but Thunder’s more of a friend to us.” Her eyes narrowed and darkened with grimness. “Let’s put it this way. If Thunder sent them, we’re probably safe. If Rock sent them, we’re in a lot of trouble.”

“I see.” Makero frowned, his green eyes darkening with unease. “So who sent them? And what should we do about it?”

“I don’t know...” Saderia’s eyes narrowed with bewilderment and she slowly shook her head. “It could have been either one of them...”

Dingo narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, then turned to face the cheetah with a curious frown. “These dingoes...When they asked for Saderia, did they use her name? Or did they call her something else?”

The cheetah took a step back in alarm at being addressed by a dingo. Nervously, he looked up at him and stammered out an answer. “They... They said they needed to talk to ‘Dingo’ and ‘the forest animal he hangs out with—the forest’s Leader.’”

Dingo’s eyes glowed with hope and he lightly flicked his tail. “It has to be Thunder’s outcasts then. Thunder knows you rule the forest. Rock doesn’t.”

Saderia bit her lip. One of her darker Dreams flickered through her mind, making her heart skip a beat. A shadow crept across her face. “I think Rock knows a lot more than you think,” she murmured softly.

Dingo frowned in confusion. “What do you mean? How could Rock possibly know you’re the Princess of the forest?”

Saderia heaved a sigh and shook her head slowly, her amber eyes dull and distant. “I don’t know, but one of my Dreams makes me think he knows a lot more than I would like him to know.”

Dingo blinked in surprise and started to speak, then closed his mouth and said nothing, his light brown eyes darkening with seriousness.

Dash frowned and anxiously lashed his tail. “So how are we supposed to know who sent them?”

Saderia’s eyes glimmered with determination. Slowly, she gazed around at her three friends and took a deep breath, her expression cool and knowing. “Well...there’s only one real way to find out for sure.”

Jeb looked up in alarm and shrank back, his blue/green eyes widening with fear.

Dash frowned, but nodded thoughtfully, trying to hide a flash of unease in his amber eyes. “There’s only two of them...If they try anything, we could probably take them out.”

“Unless it’s an ambush,” Dingo muttered.

Dash lashed his tail and glared at him. "Must you always make everything so morbid?"

"It's called being realistic," Dingo retorted, shooting him a dry glare. "You might want to try it some time."

Dash narrowed his eyes and hissed at him, but didn't say a word.

Saderia heaved a sigh, feeling the fur along her back rise up in unease. "Dingo's right," she muttered. "We don't know what we're walking into."

"They can't ambush us in our own home," Dash growled, narrowing his eyes firmly and lashing his tail. "Even if there are a couple of them hiding behind the trees, the forest is unfamiliar turf. If all of us go—you, me, Dingo, Jeb, Makero, Cia, and Jash—we'll have a good fighting force already with us. Most of us can fight them off while someone runs for reinforcements. If they try anything, we'll have the entire forest on them in two seconds flat."

"True...I suppose we've got nothing to lose by checking it out..." Saderia paused, then gazed around at her friends and family. A bright glow of determination lit up her amber eyes and she held her head higher to hide any signs of fear. "Come on. Let's go see what all this is about."

All five members of the royal family plus Saderia's close friends traveled tensely through the forest, their ears pricked and their eyes curious. The cheetah led the seven of them through the dense woods. Unease haunted his blue gaze, but he seemed to walk with less fear knowing he had the entire royal family on his side. According to him, his two friends had stayed behind to guard the dingoes and make sure they didn't go anywhere while he had run to alert the King. Silence hung over the eight animals as they crept silently through the thick, rustling undergrowth. One question seemed to burn in everyone's mind. Who had sent these mysterious dingoes?

Saderia took the lead, while her three friends quickly moved to walk beside her. All four of them shared a long, anxious look before turning back to lead the way alongside the cheetah. Saderia's eyes remained trained on the thick trees and undergrowth ahead of her. Silently, she tensed her muscles and tried to brace herself for what she might find waiting for her on the edge of the forest. It hardly mattered, though. Nothing could have

prepared her for the shock that shot through her when the four of them finally broke out of a dense clump of woods and stepped out on the empty, treeless edge of the forest.

Two ragged, scrawny dingoes sat on the grassy border between the forest and the desert, one a dark, bloody red and the other a light yellow orange. Dirt and dried blood covered their matted fur. Their eyes snapped up to her the instant she stepped out on the border. Recognition gleamed in their yellow irises the second their eyes met hers, freezing her in place.

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved, breathed, or made a sound.

Not until Dingo let out a shout. “Rip! Tear!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Allies

Silence hung in the air. Shock shone in Saderia's eyes as she stared at Dingo's older brothers. Rip and Tear. The only family he had left...The two canines stared rigidly back at her, their yellow eyes guarded and uneasy. Old scars covered Rip's face and cut through his shaggy red fur. Some of the scars lining his muzzle were probably made from her own claws. Tear sat close beside his skinny brother, his short, yellow orange fur bristling. Rip's eyes flicked to her face. A flash of recognition glowed in his yellow irises before he quickly turned away and looked at his youngest brother, his ears flattening in unease.

Confusion glowed in Saderia's eyes. What was going on? Seeing Dingo's older brothers in her forest was one shock she had not prepared for. Seeing them *alive* in and of itself sent a jolt of shock racing through her. After all the horrible things that had happened in the desert after Rock's takeover, she had wondered if Dingo had become the only surviving sibling of his family. Clearly, though, his brothers were alive. Much more pressing problems weighed down on her mind. Who had sent them—Thunder or Rock?

The last time she had met Rip and Tear, they had been avid followers of the pack. She had the scars to prove it. Every one of their meetings had ended in a fight that she had barely escaped. No one followed the brutal ways of the pack—and Bone—as fanatically as Rip, and Tear always followed Rip. So had it been Rock who had sent them?

Saderia narrowed her eyes and studied them intently, feeling a surge of confusion. Fresh scars crisscrossed Rip's body and dried blood clung to his matted dark red fur. The scruffy dingo hardly prided himself on cleanliness, but even for Rip, he looked awful. Dark bags hung under his bloodshot eyes and his ribs poked out of his sides, making him seem even skinnier than usual. His usually fatter brother, Tear, seemed almost as skinny as him. Tear's yellow eyes were dull and his short orange fur stuck

out in filthy clumps. Both of them looked horrible. They looked like... outcasts. Did that mean Thunder had sent them?

Blinking rapidly, she gazed at them in shock. "What...what are you doing here?"

Rip's eyes flicked to her face and narrowed before quickly flitting away. Avoiding her eyes, he turned to his youngest brother and uncomfortably flicked his tail. "Uh...Hi, Dingo."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock and his mouth gaped open in disbelief. Behind him, Dash and Jeb gazed at the two canines in bewilderment. Saderia's family hung back by the trees, eyeing the canines uneasily. Behind them, the cheetah and his friends slowly melted away into the shadows of the forest to let them handle the situation.

Dingo's eyes never left Rip's face. His mouth gaped open to speak, but no words came out. After what felt like a lifetime, he stared at Rip in disbelief and let out a choked growl. "*Hi?* You show up out of nowhere and that's *all* you can say?"

Tear flicked his ears and cast a scornful glance at Rip. "That's what I thought."

Rip glared at him out of the corner of his eye. "Shut up and let me do the talking."

Tear glared at him, then just rolled his eyes and sat back, saying nothing.

Taking a deep breath, Rip tore his cold gaze off Tear and slowly looked up at Dingo, studying him nervously with guarded eyes. "I...I suppose it wasn't the best thing to say," he muttered, gazing uncomfortably at his paws. "I just don't know what else to say."

Dingo blinked several times, then coldly narrowed his eyes. "How about you tell me what you're doing here and why you would *ever* want to find me?"

Rip narrowed his eyes and sharply flicked his tail. "Come on, Dingo, don't be like that. This is hard enough as it is."

Dingo heaved a sigh and faced Rip with narrowed eyes. A flicker of amusement lit up Saderia's eyes as she watched them fall into their old, argumentative routine. Every time they met, they always seemed to resume some old argument. No matter what happened—even if one believed the other to be dead—it always came back to this.

Dingo flattened his ears, his eyes flashing. “How would you like me to be? What are you even doing here? And what do you want from me?”

Rip curled his lip, then heaved a weary sigh, his eyes dull with defeat. “Look, Dingo, I know you hate me, but what do you want me to say? I’m sorry for all those years I tormented you? Fine. I’m sorry.” Embarrassment colored his face and he quickly looked away, his ears flattening with discomfort. “There, I said it. Can we *please* move on now?”

Dingo’s eyes widened in shock. Was this really, truly Rip? The Rip he knew never apologized. “You...you’re actually apologizing?” he stammered.

Rip glared at him and lashed his tail. “Yes, yes, do we *have* to drag it out?”

Dingo blinked several times in amazement. “I...Thank you,” he murmured, trying to figure out what to say. He paused, then frowned, his eyes narrowing with a mixture of shock and disbelief. “What...what exactly brought this on? You’re supposed to hate me.”

Rip looked away uncomfortably. “I don’t hate you, Dingo. I never really did.”

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “You wanted me dead. You wished Bone had killed me.”

Rip’s yellow eyes flashed and narrowed as he gazed darkly down at his paws. “Yeah, well, that was before I knew what Bone did.”

Dingo’s eyes widened in shock and his entire body froze. Taking a shaky step back, he stared at Rip in incredulity, his mouth gaping open in disbelief. Silence spread out between the two brothers for a long, tense moment. After what felt like ages, Dingo finally let out a tense whisper. “You know what Bone did to Claw?”

“And Fang,” Rip muttered, avoiding his eyes. “And probably a lot of others.”

Dingo blinked several times. “That...That he...”

“Killed them?” Rip raised an eyebrow and faced him with guarded yellow eyes. “Yeah, I know that. Why do you have to keep dragging these things out, Dingo? Jeez...” Rolling his eyes, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Anyway, are we done with the whole ‘you were right and I was wrong’ thing? Because I kind of want to move on...”

A faint smile twitched at the corners of Dingo's mouth. "All right. Sorry. I just...I can't believe you finally believe me."

Rip cracked a grin. "Yeah, I guess you weren't so crazy, after all."

Dingo tried to return the smile, then narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Who told you that anyway? About...Claw, I mean."

"Thunder." Rip glanced to the side and shared a knowing look with Tear. A soft chuckle escaped his throat. "I guess we shouldn't keep you in suspense, Dingo. We're outcasts now. Rock exiled us months ago. I suppose there's some kind of twisted irony in that, but it doesn't matter." He let out a humorless laugh and rolled his eyes. "So now the tables are turned. We're dying, starving, and probably slowly losing our minds, while you're over here with the higher-ups, living the good life. I'd like to say I know how you feel now or something sappy like that, but I'm still kind of bitter about the whole thing."

A faint smile spread across Dingo's face, but his eyes glimmered with pain as Rip's words sank in. "Outcasts," he murmured, his voice soft and tinged with incredulity, as if trying to take it in. "Wow...I have to admit, I didn't see that coming."

Rip shrugged. "Well, me neither, but I should have. I mean...if I ever hated anyone, I hated Rock. I should have figured he hated me back. The idiot was probably looking for the first excuse he got to exile me." He paused, then blinked in shock when he realized what he had said. Blinking rapidly, he looked up sharply at Dingo and gaped at him in disbelief. "Wait a minute...Did we switch places overnight or something?"

Dingo chuckled humorlessly. "It's not fun, is it?"

Rip rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, go ahead and laugh. Get it out of your system."

Dingo hid a weak smile. "Sorry. I guess I won't say anything." He paused, then frowned in confusion. "How exactly did you get exiled, though? What was Rock's first excuse to exile you?"

"You know, I'm not really sure." Rip put a paw to his chin in fake thoughtfulness. "I've narrowed it down to three things, though. One was when I told him he was a jerk for exiling this pup named Bunny, two was when I ignored his stupid orders one time, and three was when I attacked him and tried to bite his throat out to end his filthy life..." He rolled his eyes. "I didn't even get a hit on him before his idiot followers tackled me

and threw me out of camp, but I have this tendency to think he exiled me because of the third thing.”

Dingo raised an eyebrow and snickered. “You tried to kill Rock?”

Rip shrugged and grinned. “Hey, I figured if you could take down an evil overlord, I might as well give it a shot. Unfortunately, I didn’t quite think it through...”

Dingo chuckled and tried to hide a grin. “What about Tear?” he added, glancing at his other brother. “How did you get exiled?”

Tear rolled his eyes and shot Rip an annoyed glare. “I hung around with him, that’s how.” When Rip glared at him and Dingo raised an eyebrow, Tear heaved a long, weary sigh. “I have my own list of things I did that Rock probably didn’t appreciate. But at the end of the day, I got exiled because I tried to stick up for this idiot,” he growled, pointing at Rip.

“I didn’t *make* you do that!” Rip snapped, lashing his tail. “It’s not my fault!”

“Yes, it is,” Tear growled, giving a cool, resolute flick of his tail.

Rip glared at him. “Remind me again why I hang out with you.”

Tear rolled his eyes. “Because I’m the only one who can stand your charming personality.”

Rip let out an annoyed snarl. “That’s it! I’m not sharing food with you anymore!”

“Fine, I’ll get it from someone else!” Tear retorted, flattening his ears.

Rip growled and the two pointedly turned their backs on each other, their eyes blazing and tails lashing with annoyance.

Dingo raised an eyebrow. All their life, Rip and Tear had never been able to say two words to each other without getting into a fight. Even so, they always hung out with each other and somehow made up each time. A faint smile crossed his face. Seeing Rip and Tear acting like their normal, hotheaded selves made things seem almost normal.

Rip glared at Tear out of the corner of his eye, then turned back to face Dingo with a roll of his eyes. “Anyway, where were we before this idiot started whining?”

Tear shot him a glare and lashed his tail, but said nothing.

Dingo snickered, then paused, a twinge of confusion creeping into his eyes. “Wait a minute...You two have been outcasts for *months*?” When

the two shrugged and nodded, a frown crossed his face. “Then why didn’t I see you? I was out in the desert just a few days ago, and while I was, I ran into Thunder’s pack of outcasts. He even let us stay with them for a while... but I *never* saw you while we were there. Are you not part of Thunder’s pack?”

Rip heaved a sigh. “We’re part of it. The only reason you didn’t see us is because we were lost. See, a few weeks ago, Tear and I went out hunting and ended up getting surrounded by Rock’s creepy followers. We tried to fight and I managed to get a few good hits in, but we were kind of outnumbered, so we ran the first chance we got. They chased us a long way—to parts of the desert we had never seen before. After that, it took us days to find our way back to camp. We had to be extra careful and lay low, so no pack members would see us. Eventually, though, Thunder found us and brought us back to camp. Once we got there, he told us that you and your forest food—er, friends—had been there and that you had given us food.” A shadow flitted across his face. “He also said pack members had attacked the camp. A lot of the outcasts were already dead or dying by the time we got back there.”

Dingo’s eyes darkened gravely. “I see. We were there when the fight broke out and we saw the battle. It was horrible.”

Rip nodded grimly, his eyes shadowed. “So I heard.”

Dingo sighed. “So what exactly *are* you doing here, Rip? Did Thunder send you?”

Rip hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, he sent us. He seems to think me and Tear are the best ones for the job.” He paused, then cracked a grin and raised an eyebrow. “I suppose it wouldn’t surprise you too much if I told you I came here for a favor.”

Dingo chuckled. “Is *that* why you’re being so nice?”

Rip snickered and shrugged. “You can read me like a book.” His eyes softened slightly and he let out a more serious sigh. “Seriously, though, I...I do realize you were right all along. And I really need your help now... We all do.”

Dingo frowned at his soft, grave tone. “Okay...What kind of favor do you need?”

Rip took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You might want to sit down first.”

Dingo frowned in confusion, then slowly sat back on the soft grass on the edge of the forest and faced him curiously. "Do you want the forest animals to hear? Or do you just want to talk to me?"

Rip shrugged and glanced uncomfortably at his paws. "No, Thunder told me to find you *and* the forest animals. He said the tiger is the Leader of the forest." The skinny red dingo paused, then glanced uneasily at Saderia, as if seeking confirmation.

Saderia nodded slowly. "I guess you could say that. My family rules the forest."

Rip studied her thoughtfully, then glanced back at Dingo and managed a grin. "Pretty impressive. But anyway, Thunder told me to find you two. He...he needs help." He paused, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "He wants to stand up to Rock."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"What?" Dingo echoed, his mouth gaping open in disbelief.

"He wants us to stand up to Rock." Rip sighed and faced Dingo tiredly, chuckling softly to himself. "Everyone thought he was crazy, but Thunder didn't expect us to stand up to Rock alone. He knows we're too weak...we wouldn't stand a chance. I mean, half of us are on the brink of death. Lots of dingoes were against the idea." Rip paused, then narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "That's when Thunder said we would need help. He said that...that there were lots of strong animals in the forest...So he sent us here to...to ask you for help." Rip took a deep breath and slowly turned to Saderia, then looked back at Dingo, his eyes wide and pleading. "He said there was no way we could ever have a life again if we didn't fight Rock. And everyone in this forest seems strong...So please...will you help us?"

Dingo's eyes widened in surprise. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Amazement gleamed in his eyes as he stared at his older brother. Could this really be Rip? The Rip he used to know would never ask anybody for help, much less forest food.

"I..." Dingo hesitated, then narrowed his eyes uncertainly. "It's not my place to make decisions around here, Rip. You'll have to talk to Saderia and King Makero."

A frown spread across Rip's face. "Who's he?"

"The tiger with the green eyes," Dingo replied, glancing back at the dense trees beyond the border where Makero stood. "He rules the forest."

Saderia's just his successor."

Rip narrowed his eyes uncertainly and nervously flicked his tail. "Can I run it by the littler tiger first? Does she still have some say?"

Dingo shrugged, his eyes clouded with concern. "We'll see." He paused, then turned to meet Saderia's gaze, his eyes pleading. "Well, Saderia? What do you think?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes uneasily, glancing at Dingo's pleading light brown eyes and Rip's desperate yellow gaze. Both seemed to hold their breath, waiting for her decision. Wild thoughts swirled through her mind as she struggled to make sense of everything. Dingo's brothers were...alive, but they were outcasts. Thunder had sent them for help...but what exactly did the outcast Leader expect them to do? Did he want the forest's food and shelter? Or did he want to fight Rock? Was it charity he wanted, or forces?

A shiver crept down Saderia's spine and her eyes clouded with unease. Fighters were what Thunder wanted. Deep in her heart, she knew it. A memory of the outcasts' horrible appearance flitted through her mind, making her shiver. Clumps of matted, blood-streaked fur hanging off of frail, skeletal bodies had been all that was left of the outcasts. Yet all of them had banded together to help each other. That alone proved they were no longer the heartless dogs they had been before. They had *changed*. They deserved help. Since the moment she met them, she had longed to help them, but she hadn't known how...

But what about Rock's forces? A wave of fear swept over her. Every member of Rock's pack was vicious and deadly. The Leader probably exiled anyone that didn't meet his brutal standards. Back in the battle, she had watched pack members cut down outcasts with one swipe and not a single sense of remorse. When she closed her eyes, she could still see blood dripping from their fangs. If she agreed to help the outcasts, she would risk losing her own citizens in the fight. If she agreed, she might be forfeiting her own life...And yet, it wasn't right to let anyone suffer the way the outcasts were. Maybe —just maybe—with the forest animals and the outcasts combined, they could stop Rock.

Another dark thought nagged at her. A memory of the eerie Dream where she had seen a dark figure interrogating her mother flitted through her mind. Everything Thunder and Bunny had said about Rock's prisoner

echoed in her ears. Earlier, she had thought there was some missing piece she needed to find her mother. Maybe this was that missing piece. Maybe helping the outcasts would lead her to her mother.

Her eyes flicked to Dingo's scruffy face and her heart ached. Pain and hope mingled in his clouded brown eyes. Rip and Tear were his brothers, the only family he had left. His brothers, who for once in their life actually seemed to like him and who needed his help. Dingo would probably love to risk his life to help them...Her eyes flicked past Dingo to his older brothers. In any other situation, Rip and Tear would be her enemies. Now she held their lives in her paws. Her old enemies were different, though. Now that they weren't on Bone's side, they actually weren't that bad. Rip was as witty as his youngest brother, and Tear seemed shy. Both of them had the decency to admit their mistakes...albeit grudgingly.

Determination glowed in Saderia's eyes. Her mind was made up. Taking a deep breath, she turned around to look back at her father. "Dad...I think we should help them."

Shock flashed in Rip and Tear's eyes along with a tiny sense of hope. A faint smile of relief crossed Dingo's face as he watched her and her father.

Standing by the thick trees a few paces away, Makero blinked in surprise at her words, his green eyes widening in confusion. "Aren't these the dingoes who tormented you before?"

Saderia heaved a sigh. "None of that matters now, Dad. You didn't see the outcasts. They're in a horrible state. Their lives are at stake even now. All they're doing is just...waiting to die. We can't just leave them out there to suffer. Not when we can help them."

Makero narrowed his eyes uncertainly. "How exactly could we help them?"

Her eyes darted to Rip and she lightly flicked her tail. "You tell him. What did Thunder have in mind?"

Rip shifted uneasily. "Er...probably something along the lines of...a fight."

A shadow crossed Makero's face and he turned back to face Saderia with grave green eyes. "Are you sure this is a good idea? You know what this will cost the forest."

Saderia took a deep breath and steadily met his gaze. “Yes, I do. But I think this is our only option. It’s the right thing to do. To do anything else would be cruel.”

Makero took a deep breath and gazed around at Saderia, Dingo, Rip, and Tear, his eyes shadowed with thought. For what felt like years, he studied the two ragged canines with dark eyes clouded with indecision. Everyone in the clearing held their breath as they waited for him to speak. Rip and Tear never moved or tore their eyes off the forest King.

After what felt like ages, Makero let out a long sigh and firmly met their gaze. “Go get your King, or Leader, or whatever he’s called. We’ll see if we can work something out.”

Relief swept over the two canines and they nodded quickly, their eyes glowing with hope.

“Sure thing,” Rip replied, dipping his head. He paused, then turned and gave Dingo a weak smile. “Er...we’ll be back in a few hours. Thunder moved his camp a little closer to the forest so as to be easier to reach, so it probably won’t take long.”

Dingo smiled and nodded back. “All right. We’ll be waiting here.”

Rip nodded and cast one quick glance back at the King before whirling around to face the desert. Side by side, he and Tear rose to their paws and raced out into the sea of sand as fast as their paws could move. Seconds later, the two brothers disappeared behind a wall of sand dunes, leaving the royal family and Saderia’s friends behind on the edge of the forest in silence.

Tearing his eyes off the place where his brothers had disappeared, Dingo took a deep breath and slowly turned to face Saderia, his eyes glowing with gratitude. “Thank you.”

A faint, weak smile crossed her face. “It was the right thing to do.”

Hours passed as Saderia and her friends and family sat on the short grass and waited for Dingo’s brothers to return. The blinding yellow sun drifted lazily across the sky with every hour that flew past, casting burning hot light down on the bright, grassy border and lighting up Saderia’s fur. While they waited, Saderia and her companions talked everything over, trying to figure out what might happen next and what they should do. Even

after hours had passed, though, neither of them had figured out a thing. This was hardly something they could plan for.

Paw steps suddenly sounded behind her, making Saderia look up just in time to see Rip and Tear leap to the top of a tall sand dune a few feet away from them. Thunder trailed after them. Taking the lead, the yellow brown Leader padded to the edge of the forest, while Rip and Tear hung back on the sand.

A faint smile crept across Dingo's face when he looked up and saw Thunder pause on the sandy edge of the desert. "Thunder," he called, waving a paw. "Good to see you again."

Thunder weakly returned the smile. "You too."

Meeting his eyes, Saderia smiled and nodded a greeting that he returned. Concern flickered into her eyes as the Leader nervously sat down on the border in front of them. Fresh scars covered his gaunt body and dried blood clung to his messy yellow brown fur. A weary shadow haunted his dark brown eyes. Sympathy burned in her chest as she watched him, along with a boiling sense of determination. Seeing Thunder, she believed more than ever that they *needed* to help the outcasts. Not just because it might lead her to her mother, but because it was truly the right thing to do.

Dingo glanced curiously at Saderia and Makero. "Who's doing the talking?"

"You can go ahead and do most of the talking," Makero replied, stepping closer to Thunder with a calm, cool expression. "I need to know what's going on, though."

"Of course." Dingo dipped his head to the King, then turned to face Thunder with glowing brown eyes. "Leader Thunder, this is King Makero. King Makero, this is Leader Thunder."

Nervousness haunted Thunder's dark brown eyes as the King turned to face him. Uneasily, he nodded and held out a shaky paw. "H-Hello, King Makero," he stammered.

Makero dipped his head and firmly shook his paw, meeting his gaze steadily with a calm, unreadable expression. "Greetings, Leader Thunder."

Dingo sat back on the short grass and hot sand on the border in the middle of the two rulers, his light brown eyes bright as he turned to face Thunder. "So what exactly did you have in mind?"

Thunder looked away uncomfortably. "Well...I thought maybe the forest animals could provide some food for the outcasts and maybe heal the ones that are injured. I hear the forest has a lot of...er, advanced stuff that can help with healing and things like that."

"Yes, it does," Makero replied, his tone calm and his cool green eyes focused firmly on Thunder's face. "I'm sure we have enough food to feed you and your dingoes, and we have healers that can treat their wounds. That much, we can give you."

"But even if we do help them, if they go back to the desert, Rock could easily hurt them again," Saderia spoke up. Flicking her tail, she stepped into the circle of Dingo and the two rulers, her eyes blazing with determination. "Plus, it would be hard to keep transporting supplies to them if they live in the desert. Even if they made their camp right on the forest's edge, it would still take several hours to get from the heart of the forest to here."

Dingo narrowed his eyes in thought. "So what do you suggest? Should we...allow the outcasts to stay here in the forest with the forest animals for the time being?"

Makero frowned thoughtfully. "That seems best. The only problem is that I don't think I have nearly enough houses for them. How many outcasts are there anyway?"

Thunder shifted uncomfortably and avoided his gaze. "I'm not sure. Hundreds..."

The King nodded slowly, his green eyes distant with thought. "I don't have hundreds of empty houses. We might have a problem there."

Dingo lightly flicked his tail, his eyes calm and unconcerned. "Dingoes don't need houses. Just find a wide open space big enough for them to make camp."

Makero blinked in surprise, then gazed thoughtfully at Thunder. "Would that be all right?"

Thunder shrugged. "Of course. We've been sleeping out in the open for months."

"All right." Makero narrowed his eyes in thought, then flicked his tail lightly and smiled. "I know somewhere you might be able to make camp."

“The meeting place,” Saderia guessed, her amber eyes lighting up with hope and excitement. “That place is big enough to fit *thousands* of dingoes!”

“Exactly.” A faint smile crossed Makero’s face before he turned to face Thunder more seriously. “If your pack agrees to come to the forest, we’ll have a place for you to move into temporarily. Before you move in, though, I’ll have to address the kingdom to make sure they’ll tolerate it. I can’t guarantee the kingdom will want to help and let you stay, but I’ve done a lot to earn their trust, so hopefully, they’ll come to accept the idea.”

Thunder nodded and let out a sigh. “I understand.”

“Good.” Makero met Thunder’s gaze unwaveringly. “Now what do you want us to do about this guy that’s tormenting you? We have a lot of forest animals here, so I’m sure we can spare some for a battle. Is that what you had in mind?”

Thunder hesitated, then nodded nervously. “I...I was hoping that... if the outcasts regained their strength, we could stand up to him. But Rock has greater numbers, so we couldn’t face him alone. I hoped we might be able to join forces. I don’t know if you have forest animals that are willing to fight, but if you do, we would forever be in your debt.”

Makero nodded slowly, his eyes distant and thoughtful. “I know a lot of animals who would probably help. Enough that they might at least even out your numbers to make it a fair fight. But forest animals don’t usually have to fight, so we would have to take time to train most of them and prepare them. I could hold a meeting and ask for volunteers to fight, but I’m not going to force anyone to take part in this battle.”

Thunder nodded quickly. “I understand.”

“All right.” Makero met his gaze calmly, his glowing eyes never leaving his face. “If that’s what you want, then we have a deal. From this point on, we are allies. Agreed?”

Thunder dipped his head quickly, his dark brown eyes lighting up with hope. “Agreed.” When Makero offered his paw, he swiftly shook it in agreement.

Makero sat back and faced Thunder thoughtfully. “So tell me more about this Rock guy and what I should expect. What’s his army like?”

Saderia’s eyes darkened. “Well, you saw what six of them did to Dash.”

Thunder glanced uneasily at his paws and nervously flicked his tail. “Rock’s been training them for months. Only the strongest dingoes stay in the pack. You’ve probably already heard all the other stories about the pack and how cruel the pack members are...”

Makero’s eyes darkened and he nodded gravely. “Yes, Dingo’s told me a lot.”

Dingo looked up with shadowed brown eyes. “The main thing is that the pack members don’t have a conscience, which means they can kill without hesitating. Whereas for decent forest animals, killing is probably a bit harder to do. It was for me, at least. So the pack has the advantage in that they *can* kill without feeling a hint of remorse, while you and the forest animals would probably want to avoid major casualties to both sides.”

A shadow crossed Makero’s face. “That’s a good point. Is that true, Thunder?”

Thunder blinked at Dingo in surprise, then nodded, his dark brown eyes narrowing with unease. “Yes, that’s true. I think he has a good point.”

The King nodded darkly, his eyes shadowed. “That’s a difficult problem. I don’t want to turn my animals into cold-blooded killers, but they need to be able to fight. I’ll have to give this a lot of thought...In the meantime, I should propose the idea of letting you move into the kingdom. That way, you’ll be safe while I work out a strategy.” He paused, then glanced back at Cia and Uncle Jash, who hung back by the trees. His eyes glowed with determination. “Cia! Jash! Gather the forest animals for a meeting!”

The two tigers exchanged an uneasy glance, then turned and raced into the dense forest, disappearing in a rustle of undergrowth. Tearing his gaze off the forest, Makero thoughtfully turned back to Saderia. “So...any idea how I should start this meeting?”

Saderia’s eyes glowed with hope. “All four of us should be at the meeting and all of us should address the forest animals—you, me, Dingo, and Thunder. Thunder should be there because he’s the outcasts’ Leader and he should have his say. Dingo should also be at the meeting to remind the forest animals that we should accept foreigners and help them, like we did for him. We should all tell the forest animals what Rock’s been doing to the outcasts and then tell them our plan to let the dingoes move in with us temporarily. We shouldn’t tell them about the battle yet. We should give

them a chance to get used to the dingoes and maybe even start to like them before we propose the idea of a battle.”

Makero nodded thoughtfully, his eyes gleaming with pride. “That’s a good idea.” His glowing green eyes flicked back to Thunder. “Saderia’s right. The forest animals should probably get to know you and the other dingoes so that they’ll want to help you more. I know you can’t completely control your outcasts, but please tell them to try to be nice.”

Thunder nodded quickly and forced himself to meet his eyes. “They will be.”

“Good.” Makero gazed around at Thunder, Saderia, and her companions, then lightly flicked his tail. “It’s settled then. We’ll all go to the meeting and see how things go. If it goes well, Thunder and Dingo’s brothers can go back to get the outcasts to bring them here, and Saderia and I will show them where to go and help them get settled in.

“All right.” Thunder dipped his head in gratitude. “Lead the way.”

Legions of forest animals covered the wide, grassy clearing in front of Saderia. Anxious muttering rose up among the crowd and every animal exchanged nervous glances. Unease shone in their eyes as they murmured about everything Makero had told them, filling the entire clearing with low, fearful murmurs. Saderia stood at the front of the meeting place atop a wooden stage with a rough set of stairs that had been built at the last minute before the meeting started. Since dingoes couldn’t climb trees, the stage had been necessary to allow Dingo and Thunder to stand with them. On the stage stood Makero, Dash, Dingo, and Thunder. Every animal in the forest sat in the clearing before them, gazing up with wide eyes and muttering anxiously to each other. Just moments ago, Makero had told them about the desert’s deplorable conditions and proposed his idea to let the outcasts stay in the forest while they recovered. Now all that was left to do was wait for the kingdom’s decision.

Hope and unease glowed in Saderia’s eyes. Part of her feared the forest animals would reject the idea, but she forced herself to hide her worry. Beside her, Dash sat gazing out at the forest animals with a confident expression. Makero stood near the front of the stage, his eyes glowing with determination. Near the left edge of the stage, Cia and Uncle Jash sat fidgeting anxiously as they waited for the forest’s answer. Unease colored

their blue eyes. Neither of them seemed happy about the plan to let the outcasts stay, but they didn't protest since the decision wasn't theirs to make.

Thunder sat huddled near the back of the stage, his eyes filled with fear and unease. With every second that passed, the outcast Leader seemed to shrink back more and more, as if dreading the kingdom's answer. Beside Thunder, Dingo sat up straight and gazed steadily down at the forest animals, his expression calm and composed. Not even the slightest flick of his tail suggested he was nervous about the outcome of the meeting.

Saderia's eyes narrowed when she saw the forest animals' nervous looks. Taking a deep breath, she spoke out in a loud, confident voice. "The pack Leader needs to be stopped, and the outcasts need to get away from him. The things he's done are disgusting." When the crowd looked up in surprise, she launched into a tale about the outcasts' awful conditions. Her lip curled as she described the pack's bloody rules—how outcasts were to be hunted down for entertainment. At the end, she recounted the pack's bloody invasion of the outcast camp.

Horror gleamed in the animals' eyes by the time she finished. Their whispers grew louder as they considered the idea. Still, some eyed the royal family with doubts clear in their eyes. A few cast wary glances at Thunder, as if afraid he would attack. Honestly, Saderia couldn't blame them. Since they had crossed the desert and been attacked by the pack, all the forest animals had come to fear dingoes. Most saw dingoes as inherently bad. The only one they trusted was the only one who had given them reason to—Dingo, the 'different' one. At that point, though, he probably wasn't even considered one of them anymore.

Her eyes flicked to Thunder and she let out an urgent hiss. "Say something!"

Thunder's eyes widened in surprise. "Like what?"

"Tell them something to get them to trust you," she urged, her eyes glowing with hope. "Tell them what you went through and how you realized the pack was evil."

Thunder blinked several times and hesitated, then nervously stepped up beside her, his paws shaky. When the forest animals looked up at him in unease, he froze. Shakily, he gazed at the nervous crowd with uneasy eyes, then took a deep breath and launched into a weak story. Nervously, he

explained how he had been exiled trying to put an end to the pack's cruelty. He told them about Rock's tyranny, how he hunted down the outcasts, and how Thunder had united the outcasts to survive. His voice shook and sometimes sounded too quiet to hear, but more and more animals quieted to hear him, their eyes bright with sympathy. If anything, his lack of confidence only encouraged their sympathy.

Nervously, Thunder trailed off and stepped back once he finished. Silence fell over the clearing. Saderia held her breath, waiting for the kingdom to reach a decision.

Casting a long, thoughtful glance out at the forest, Makero raised his head and watched the crowd with calm, thoughtful green eyes. "So...would all of you, my kingdom, be able to accept the dingoes coming to live here in the clearing temporarily?"

At once, answers rang out through the clearing as forest animals shouted their response. Cries and shouts echoed all throughout the forest. Every animal threw back their head to add their voice to the mixture. Relief crashed over Saderia and she heaved a long, grateful sigh when she realized most of the animals were saying, "Yes."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Teamwork

Bright rays of sunlight shone down on the edge of the forest, bathing the border in brilliant yellow light. Saderia sat on the border where the sparse grass turned to hot sand, staring out at the sand dunes with glowing amber eyes. Her tail twitched impatiently back and forth across the short grass. Dash, Dingo, and Jeb sat on either side of her, watching the desert for any sign of outcasts. Her father and aunt and uncle were back in the meeting place, having grudgingly agreed to let the four of them travel to the border on their own.

Back at the wide clearing, the royal family were preparing a feast for the starved outcasts. Somehow, Makero had convinced most of the forest animals to contribute some of their own food to the feast. Considering how plentiful it was, giving food wasn't a big deal to most animals, but Saderia still appreciated the fact that the forest animals were at least *trying* to be nice to the dingoes. Hopefully, the outcasts would return the favor.

A long sigh breathed out of her throat and her eyelids drooped as she watched the desert. Hours had passed since Thunder, Rip, and Tear had left to find the outcasts and bring them to the forest. Already, the sun had begun to sink closer to the horizon. For hours, Saderia and her friends had sat on the border, waiting for the outcasts to appear and trying not to fidget. Her paws shuffled restlessly on the grass and she heaved a sigh. Blinking to keep her eyes open, she gazed out at the horizon and felt her heart skip with hope.

Dark, hazy figures suddenly appeared at the top of a sand dune several feet away. Seconds later, hundreds of gaunt, filthy dingoes poured down the dune and raced toward the forest in one huge crowd. Thunder's outcasts. Excitement glowed in the eyes of every outcast. Thunder raced at the head of the group, leading them toward the forest. His unofficial Second in Command, Brawny, raced along the side of the huge crowd, making sure

everyone kept up. Rip bounded along near the front, shouting to the others and urging them onward.

Saderia's heart leapt with excitement. Slowly, the crowd of outcasts raced toward the border and crowded around the edge of the desert, while Thunder stepped onto the sparse grass and dipped his head in greeting, a hopeful gleam in his dark brown eyes.

Saderia smiled and nodded back. "Hi, Thunder. Everyone's here, right?"

Thunder managed a weak smile. "Yes, we're all here. Is everything ready for us?"

"Yes. My Dad and the rest of my family are at the meeting place now, trying to make things a little more comfortable," she replied, giving him a warm smile.

"All right." Thunder paused, then dipped his head to her, his eyes gleaming with gratitude. "Thank you so much for helping us."

A gleam of sympathy crept into her eyes as she gave him a weak smile. "You're welcome."

Thunder nodded appreciatively, then glanced curiously over at Dingo. "So is there anything in the forest we need to watch out for? Anything dangerous?"

Dingo flicked his tail lightly and shook his head. "No, they don't have things like floods or the Snake Pit here. Just be nice to the other forest animals and don't startle them. It might take them a while to get used to you."

Thunder blinked in surprise and wonder, then nodded slowly. "Sounds nice here."

Dingo grinned, then turned to Saderia and flicked his tail. "Shall we get moving?"

A smile crossed Saderia's face and she nodded, flicking her tail toward the crowd to signal for them to follow. "Outcasts, follow me. I'll take you all to your new home."

A few last rays of sunlight shone through the leafy canopy into the abandoned meeting place. The makeshift wooden stage sat near the front of the huge clearing. Thick trees rose up all around the meeting place, reaching out with welcoming, leaf-covered branches and casting a wide

patch of shade over the sparse grass and dirt. An enormous pile of food sat right in the center of the clearing, speckled with fading sunlight.

Saderia stumbled sleepily through a dense clump of brush and broke out on the edge of the clearing. Behind her, the crowd of outcasts froze and gazed past the thick trees rising up around them into the meeting place. Gasps of incredulity echoed around the clearing when the outcasts caught sight of the pile of food. Their eyes widened with amazement. A few of them lurched forward to race toward it, but Thunder immediately shoved them back, shooting them a warning look.

Narrowing his eyes, Thunder glanced uncertainly at Saderia. "Is that...for us?"

"Yep." Saderia grinned and flicked her tail toward the food. "Help yourselves."

"I get the first bite!" someone yelled.

Other howls of excitement burst out through the forest. All at once, the crowd of outcasts surged into the clearing, pouring out through the trees on the outskirts of the meeting place. Bushes rustled as hordes of canines streamed out of the woods on either side of her and crowded into the wide clearing, surrounding the pile of food.

"Eat *slowly*!" Thunder shouted, lashing his tail in frustration and flattening his ears as dogs surged past him. "And for crying out loud, save some for later!"

None of the outcasts listened to their Leader. Barely noticing his words, the dingoes crowded around the food pile and dove in until she could no longer see the pile behind the crowd. Thunder narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth in frustration, but said nothing else. The outcast Leader hung back on the outskirts of the clearing, eyeing the pile of food with longing but keeping himself firmly in place, as if holding himself back.

Saderia gave him a weak smile and tapped him lightly with her tail. "This is the forest's meeting place," she explained. "In a few days, we're going to call the forest animals to another meeting to propose your idea of fighting against Rock. You and the outcasts should stay for that meeting. I'll let you know when it will happen so you and the outcasts can make room for the others." Her eyes flicked toward the rapidly dwindling food pile and a knowing, playful gleam crept into her eyes. "You can eat, you know. We have plenty of food."

Thunder's eyes widened in surprise. "Are you sure?"

She nodded warmly. "Yes. You're their Leader. You should keep your strength."

Gratitude flashed in Thunder's eyes. Dipping his head, he instantly turned and dove toward the crowd surrounding the food, disappearing behind a clump of canines.

A warm smile crossed Saderia's face as she watched the outcasts swarm the food pile. The outcasts closest to the pile grabbed one piece of food and tossed it back to the others. Piece by piece, the food traveled all the way to the outcasts in the very back of the thick crowd until everyone had a piece. Soon, the food pile dwindled to nothing. When at last there were few pieces of food to share, the outcasts began to back away from the pile.

All of the outcasts gradually began to spread out into the wide, shady clearing, looking around with wide eyes and undisguised curiosity. A few canines slowly circled the clearing, poking their noses into bushes on the outskirts of the meeting place and sniffing at the grass. One of them walked up to a thick oak on the edge of the clearing and prodded at it experimentally, then leapt away quickly, as if afraid it would attack. Some of the outcasts tentatively laid down on the grass to test how it felt, then instantly rose to find another place when the grass proved too prickly. A few circled a beautiful purple flower, studying it intently as if it were some sort of alien life form. Another group batted at a fallen pinecone near the outskirts, while others studied the fallen leaves around the trees intently, jumping back with a yelp whenever a falling leaf touched them. Amusement shone in Saderia's eyes. As evil as they had been in the past, the dingoes were strangely adorable.

Her friends slowly crept past her into the clearing after the outcasts. Dingo sat a few paces away from her with Rip and Tear, sharing a piece of food and tentatively carrying on a conversation. Their voices were soft, as if they weren't quite sure how to get along with each other, but every now and then, Rip threw back his head and let out his weird, hyena-like laugh. Gradually, the three brothers seemed to warm up to each other. A warm smile crossed Saderia's face when she saw the gleam of happiness in Dingo's light brown eyes.

Tearing her gaze off Dingo, Saderia gazed around the clearing, searching for familiar faces to see who had survived the battle. Relief glowed in her eyes when she spotted Lightning carrying his little sister, Bunny, by the scruff of her neck. Curiosity glowed in the pup's wide amber eyes as she gazed at her new forest home. Only a few gashes covered Lightning's yellow side and only a scratch or two cut across Bunny's fluffy black face. Gazing around with shining yellow eyes, Lightning gently set Bunny down on the grass. The second her brother let go of her, Bunny leapt to her paws and instantly raced off to chase a falling leaf, taking advantage of her new strength and grinning faintly.

Saderia studied Bunny intently as she pounced the leaf to the ground. She hadn't forgotten how creepy the pup had looked in the battle when she had stared up at Saderia with those eerie, accusing amber eyes. Somehow, Bunny had known that pack members had seen them and would attack them...even though she hadn't actually seen the pack members. Confusion and curiosity glowed in Saderia's eyes. Something was off about the tiny pup, but she couldn't quite figure out what. Shaking her head, she pushed the thoughts away and tore her eyes off Bunny to gaze out at the rest of the clearing.

A few of the outcasts were ones she recognized, but she also saw a few unfamiliar faces—new outcasts, perhaps? Her eyes glowed with hope as she watched the gaunt dingoes settle into their new home. None seemed badly hurt and all of them seemed a lot more lively and excited now that they had eaten. Maybe they would all be fine, after all.

Anxiety stirred in her chest at the thought. She had wanted to help them and she had answered their plea for help, but in order to help them, someday she would have to lead her own kingdom into battle. Soon, she would be fighting pack members and all of the outcasts in front of her would be, too. A shadow flitted across her face as she gazed out at the outcasts. How many would make it out alive? How many would never return?

A booming roar rang out through the clearing, making every animal quiet and gaze curiously up at the front of the clearing. Makero stood on the edge of the wooden stage, gazing out at the enormous crowd gathered before him with calm, determined green eyes. Saderia sat close beside her

father, holding her head high and watching the animals below her with shining amber eyes. On Makero's other side, Thunder stood gazing nervously out at the legions of animals before them. Hundreds and hundreds of animals filled the clearing, gazing up with wide, expectant eyes and questioning looks. Forest animals covered the entire left side of the clearing, while outcasts huddled together on the right side.

Saderia's aunt and uncle sat near the front of the crowd of forest animals with Dash close beside them. Jeb and his parents sat somewhere in the middle of the crowd. On the right side of the clearing, Dingo sat near the front of the crowd of outcasts next to his older brothers, gazing expectantly up at the outcast Leader as if he were one of them. Around the meeting place, every animal slowly quieted down until silence fell over the clearing. Each of them gazed up at the three animals atop the stage, their eyes wide and wondering.

Three days had passed since the dingoes had moved into the clearing. Already, the outcasts seemed better off. Their bellies had grown fuller until their ribs no longer poked out of their sides, and their fur had become cleaner and more well-groomed. Hope shone in the dingoes' eyes—a huge change from the desolation that had haunted their faces in the desert. To Saderia's surprise, the dingoes and the forest animals had actually seemed to get along. In just three days, some of them had begun to form tentative friendships with animals from the other side. When the meeting had first started, she had spotted several dingoes chatting with forest animals. Hope shone in her eyes at the memory. Maybe the forest animals *would* agree to help their new allies fight Rock. Still...it was a lot to ask for.

Her father cleared his throat, drawing her out of her thoughts. With glowing eyes, Makero stared out at the crowd and raised his voice until it boomed out over the entire clearing. "Animals of the forest, I have some very important news to announce! Several days ago, Leader Thunder came to me and asked for help. He told me of the hardships he and his pack mates had been enduring. Starvation, attacks, brutal injuries...All of these things, the outcasts faced on a daily basis in the desert simply because they were outcasts, exiled by the cruel pack Leader, Rock. I agreed to help Thunder's outcasts escape this cruel life. That is why I brought them to the forest and allowed them to live in this clearing. It is why I asked all of you to offer them food. When I agreed to help Thunder, we became allies."

Makero's voice rang with determination. "However, what we have done is not enough. We have offered them shelter, food, and safety, but it is not enough. There is a deeper problem that is yet to be fixed." With a broad sweep of his tail, he gestured to the dingoes on the right side of the clearing. "The forest is not the outcasts' home. They cannot stay here forever and they do not wish to. The desert is their home. But as long as the tyrant Rock lives, these dingoes can never return to the desert and expect to live."

Anxious whispers broke out among the huge crowd of forest animals. Several of them shifted uncomfortably where they stood.

The King raised his voice to be heard over the murmurs of the crowd. "Thunder believes that the only way to get his life back, along with the lives of all of the outcasts under his protection, is to stand up to Rock. I believe he is right. Unless the desert tyrant is defeated, more dingoes will suffer the same fate Thunder and his outcasts suffered, and the dingoes we see before us today will never regain their old lives.

"A fight is the only way the outcasts will be able to stop Rock." Makero's eyes flashed in the bright sunlight. "Thunder's plan is to fight Rock in order to regain the outcasts' freedom. However, his numbers do not equal Rock's and the strength of his outcasts—even now that they are well-fed—still pales in comparison to Rock's forces. He has asked for our help in defeating Rock. I believe that helping the outcasts is the right thing to do. Therefore, I have offered to join Thunder in battle against Rock in order to help the outcasts regain their freedom and bring peace to the desert. I would like the forest to join forces with the outcasts to fight against Rock. Helping them win this battle is the right thing to do."

Anxious cries rang out the instant the words left his mouth. Alarm glowed in the eyes of the forest animals as they glanced nervously at their neighbors, muttering fearfully to each other. Their stunned voices grew louder and louder until Makero let out a roar.

"Quiet!" The King's voice split the air. "I will have order in my meeting!"

A loud, terrified voice rang out over the murmurs of the crowd even as the other whispers died down. "Why should we help them?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes in determination. "Because it's the right thing to do."

A lynx in the crowd let out a stunned cry. "But the dingoes are evil!" He paused, then glanced at a nearby dingo and gave him a sheepish shrug. "Er...no offence..."

The dingo rolled his eyes. Saderia resisted the urge to do the same.

"These dingoes aren't evil. Not anymore," she growled, her voice ringing out over the clearing and her eyes shining with conviction. "They never really were. They were just a product of their cruel society. They have seen the truth and now you can see their true natures. Dingoes like Rock are the true evil ones who have given the rest of the dingoes such a bad name. The only way to stop the cruelty in the desert is to stop Rock!"

"Once evil, always evil!" One of the forest animals let out a snarl and lashed his tail. "Why should the forest do them any favors?"

Saderia's tail twitched with irritation, but she faced the crowd calmly, her amber eyes burning with determination. "Because it's the right thing to do. If it was you who was starving and injured, wouldn't *you* want someone to help you?"

One forest animal let out a cold hiss. "We certainly wouldn't get help from *them*!"

Saderia heaved a sigh. "Maybe not in the past, but they've changed. These ones have, at least. Besides, if we help the dingoes now, we'll be allies. Isn't it better to keep the peace between us? Think about it. If we help them now, then the desert and the forest will be at harmony with each other. Don't you think it's better to have peaceful neighbors like the outcasts rather than cruel, tyrannical ones like Rock and his pack?"

One of the forest animals nervously flicked his tail. "She's right!"

Another let out a growl. "Maybe...but I still don't trust dingoes. Even if we help them now, they'll probably just go right back to being evil. They'll never pay us back!"

"Yeah, we can't trust them!" someone shouted, their voice filled with anger.

"Would you stop it?" A sharp voice from the middle of the crowd hissed in a voice dripping with contempt. "They aren't *that* bad! If you hadn't been so caught up in hating them, you could have tried to talk to them and realized that they're decent animals!"

"Yeah, you guys are just as bad as them!" another animal shouted, lashing his tail in frustration. "You criticize them because you think they

wouldn't help you in *your* hour of need, and yet you refuse to help them in theirs! Isn't the forest better than this?"

From where he stood near the back of the stage, Thunder blinked and stared out at the forest animals in shock, stunned that anyone had actually stood up for his outcasts.

Saderia's eyes flashed with hope. "The forest should always pride itself on its generosity and its willingness to help those in need. It doesn't matter if the dingoes 'pay us back' or not. The forest is lucky to have such a peaceful society. We should help those who are less fortunate. That in itself should be enough to 'pay us back.'"

A long silence followed her words, broken only by a few anxious whispers.

After a long, tense moment of quiet, a soft voice hesitantly spoke out over the murmurs of the crowd. "She's right," a panther muttered. "Sign me up."

"Me too!" another voice shouted, their tone filled with determination.

A soft murmur sounded from the crowd. "I suppose she might have a point..."

Makero's eyes glowed with hope as agreement slowly spread through the clearing. One by one, the animals warmed up to the idea of helping the outcasts, albeit grudgingly. A few protested, but their cries of dissent were swallowed up by the other eager calls. Eventually, everyone seemed to agree that it was the right thing to do. The idea had been accepted.

A bright smile spread across the King's face and his voice rang out over the murmurs of the forest animals. "I'm glad you all can see that this is the right thing to do. Now that you've agreed, I'll need volunteers who are willing to fight in the battle. I need not only fighters, but healers, as well. Any help is appreciated. There will be training for those who want to help but do not know how to fight. Speak now if you would like to volunteer. If you need time to think it over, you may also come to me later if you decide to join the fight. Think carefully before you decide, though. The battle will be difficult and possibly even deadly, and we need dedicated fighters. Be aware of the dangers and risks before you decide."

Fear glowed in the eyes of the forest animals, but a sense of determination hung in the air. Soft whispers spread through the clearing as the animals thought it over and spoke with their neighbors. A tense quiet filled only with whispers fell over the wide clearing. Saderia held her breath and dug her claws into the wooden stage, waiting for their response.

After what felt like an eternity, a panther slowly lifted his head and faced the King with curious, wondering eyes. “Is the royal family going to fight?”

Makero’s eyes gleamed with determination and he nodded firmly. “Yes, we are. I will be leading my fighters into battle and I will fight alongside you.” The King paused, then took a deep breath and gazed darkly at Saderia, a weary gleam in his eyes. “Though I am hesitant to include them...Princess Saderia and Prince Dash will also fight in the war.”

Saderia instantly held her head higher, her bright amber eyes glittering with pride. Nothing could have made her prouder than to be able to fight for her forest and the outcasts. Over the past few days, she and her father had gone back and forth for hours at a time over whether or not she and Dash would be allowed to fight. After a vicious round of arguing, her father had finally given in and allowed her to fight, albeit grudgingly.

In her heart, she felt bad for having to force her father’s hand. She knew the King hated to put her in danger, and the battle was just about the most dangerous thing she could think of. In her mind, though, she knew her decision to fight had been an honorable one—the right thing to do. This was her fight anyway. Plus, she knew how to fight, and after facing them on plenty of occasions, she knew what dingo fighting tactics were like better than anyone. If she didn’t think she would be useful in the fight, she wouldn’t have joined, but she knew she could use her knowledge to make a difference in the battle.

Her aunt and uncle had strongly disapproved at letting her fight, but it wasn’t their place to protest. When she reminded them that she had faced plenty of dangers before and that half of the outcasts who would fight were around her age, they said nothing more.

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she gazed down at the legions of forest animals before her and held her breath. Hoping beyond hope that just one animal would volunteer, she waited for someone to step forward and make a move. Nobody spoke for what felt like ages. The forest animals

exchanged nervous glances, but didn't say a word. Tense silence fell over the crowd. No one dared to move a muscle for what felt like years. After what seemed like an eternity, though, an animal near the back of the clearing finally raised his head and faced her with an air of determination. "I'll do it."

Shock glimmered in Saderia's eyes. Following the sound of the voice, she found herself staring at a sleek, scruffy cheetah standing at the back of the clearing among a crowd of leopards, his head held high with pride and his green eyes glowing with determination. Saderia didn't recognize his face, but she recognized the smaller cheetah standing beside him—Loki. Two other male leopards stood beside Loki, while a female leopard stood close beside the male cheetah. Saderia's eyes widened in surprise. The cheetah who had spoken must be Loki's father.

Makero's eyes glowed with hope and he dipped his head gratefully to the cheetah. "Thank you. We appreciate your offer to volunteer and your service will be greatly valued." His eyes flicked to the crowd with a determined gleam. "Any others?"

Instantly, another leopard from the spotted crowd gathered around Loki's family stepped forward and held her head high. "I volunteer." Maeta's strong voice floated up from the crowd. "And I will certainly discuss it with my leopards when we return to our home."

Makero grinned faintly and nodded to the leopard leader. "Thank you, Maeta."

Another voice rang out from the center of the crowd. "I volunteer, too!" When Saderia tried to see who had spoken, she thought she saw a panther, but couldn't be sure.

"Me too!" shouted a lioness who stood close to a group of dingoes.

A lynx near the left edge of the clearing let out a yowl. "Count me in!"

Dozens of cries of agreement echoed around the clearing as more animals threw their voices into the mix. Saderia's heart beat faster with hope and a bright smile crossed her face as more animals stepped forward to volunteer. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Thunder's stunned face. Shock gleamed in the outcast Leader's eyes and his mouth gaped open in disbelief, as if he was stunned he was getting any help at all.

In front of the crowd of outcasts, Dingo gazed calmly around at the clearing, his face as unreadable as ever. His light brown eyes were clouded, as if deep in thought. The desert dog was probably adding the number of volunteers to the number of outcasts to see how many allies they had. A faint smile crept across Saderia's face. Dingo was always strategizing. Between him, her family, and her friends, they could probably come up with a pretty good plan. With all of them together, this battle could truly end in their victory.

Makero's eager, booming voice rang out over the cries of the forest animals, drawing her out of her thoughts. "I appreciate everyone's cooperativeness and willingness to fight for what is right! Your service to the forest will not be overlooked. For those of you who have not volunteered, you will not be reprimanded for your silence."

The King's eyes darkened in a sudden grave, serious expression. "That said, I will warn those of you who have volunteered and those who are thinking of volunteering that this type of service requires a lot of dedication and bravery. If you agree to fight, you must be willing to give your life to the cause. You might face unspeakable dangers and horrors—you must be prepared for that. You must also be willing to work with your fellow forest animals as well as the dingoes. You must be willing to train every day until the day of the battle to ensure you will be able to fight the enemy *and* protect yourselves, your families, your friends, and your allies." His eyes glittered with determination. "Training starts *tomorrow*. I will give everyone who has volunteered time to go home and talk this over with friends and family. Do not be afraid to back out if this seems too big of a commitment—we need dedicated fighters. Anyone who still wants to join the fight should come back to the meeting place tomorrow morning at five o'clock sharp for training."

Silence spread over the crowd of forest animals, filled only with a few anxious whispers. Several animals exchanged uneasy glances, while others simply nodded, their faces solemn.

Makero flicked his tail and calmly sat back to face the forest animals. "You are all free to leave now. How you choose to spend your time after this is entirely up to you. Those who have volunteered might want to spend some time getting to know our allies, the dingoes, but you are not required to. For now, you are free to go."

Slowly, the forest animals rose to their paws and began to shuffle toward the woods bordering the outskirts of the clearing. Anxious mutters spread through the crowd as they slowly began to disperse and leave the meeting place. A few hung back to speak to the dingoes, though a hint of nervousness haunted their faces.

Saderia heaved a relieved sigh and leapt down from the wooden stage onto the grassy ground. A faint smile crept across her face when Dash rose from where he stood near the front of the clearing and quickly walked over to meet her near the bottom of the stage. Across from them, Dingo glanced up from where he stood at the head of the crowd of outcasts, then quickly bounded over to them.

A faint gleam of hope crept into Saderia's eyes as she gazed around at her friends. "I hope a lot of them show up tomorrow."

"Me too," Dash murmured, casting a dark, stony glance back at the crowds.

Saderia nodded thoughtfully, then gazed at Dingo with a curious gleam in her eyes. "What are you going to do, Dingo?"

A faint smile crept across Dingo's face. "I'm going to spend the night here with the outcasts. I'll help them get settled in and calm them down. I think I'll tell them more about the forest to warm them up to the forest animals, too. If you guys want to go home, I can keep an eye on them and any forest animals that stay here for the rest of the night."

"That's very kind." Makero crept up to the edge of the stage and gazed down at the three friends with glowing, grateful green eyes. "I would very much appreciate that, Dingo. I would like to go home tonight to talk some things over with my family."

Dingo dipped his head. "In that case, I'll see you tomorrow, King Makero."

Saderia smiled warmly. "See you in the morning, Dingo." She paused, then flicked him with her tail and rolled her eyes in exasperation. "And please, get some rest."

Dingo grinned. "I'll try, but you're asking an awful lot of an insomniac."

Saderia just rolled her eyes and flicked him playfully with her tail. Giving him a smile, she turned to face the clearing, searching the lingering crowds of forest animals and dingoes for any sign of Jeb. When she spotted

the creature standing with his parents, the three kraguers instantly raced toward them to walk home with them. At the same time, Dingo gave her one last smile, then turned and padded back toward the crowd of outcasts.

Behind her, Makero leapt down from the stage and gestured for his family to follow. When Jeb's family and her own family fell into step behind her, Saderia slowly turned to follow her father toward the edge of the clearing. When she gazed back into the clearing, the last thing she saw before she disappeared into the undergrowth was Dingo talking to Rip and Tear. On his face was one of the brightest smiles she had ever seen.

"You've done well, son."

Dash's eyes flicked to the shadowy trees on the outskirts of the ghostly dream clearing at the sound of the cool voice. In a soft rustle of undergrowth, Dastarius crept out from the shadows of the woods and stepped into the clearing, his amber eyes glowing with an eerie light. Smoothly, the dark lion sat back in front of Dash and curled his tail neatly over his paws. The dark spirit stared straight past Dash at something he couldn't see, his amber irises absent with thought. "Everything is going according to plan. Everything is right on schedule..."

Dash pricked his ears hopefully. "It is?"

Dastarius nodded slowly, his eyes bright but clouded, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. "Yes. If things keep going the way they're going now, it's only a matter of time before all our plans and hard work pay off. Just a matter of time..."

Dash frowned, then sighed. "I suppose you still won't tell me what's going on."

A faint sneer crept across Dastarius's face as he shook himself out of his haze to meet Dash's eyes. "Unfortunately, it's not the right time. But you don't need to worry, son. Soon, everything will make sense. Soon, you will understand exactly what you need to do." An eerie light glinted in his amber eyes and a knowing sneer spread across his face. "You and Princess have set this up very well, Dash. For the first time, the dingoes and forest animals have been united. I bet this is Princess's dream come true. Not that this is the first time her Dreams have come true," he added with a faint twitch of his black-tipped tail. "So long as Princess encourages them, the forest animals and the dingoes will get along. They will start to trust each

other. They'll form an alliance. They'll become one whole entity, rather than two separate groups. Easy for you and Princess to control."

Dastarius's glowing eyes darted absently to the shadowy trees surrounding them. "If all goes according to plan, Dash, you and Princess will be able to lead the dingoes and the forest animals into a war against Rock. If you win the war, *everyone* gets what they want. However, there are certain steps that need to be taken in order for you to win. I'll tell you what to do each step of the way, so it all works out. Right now, all you have to do is practice fighting with the dingoes during the daytime. Learn their weak points and their fighting tactics, so that you'll be able to use them against the other dingoes. During the night, we'll continue meeting here, so I can keep teaching you how to fight."

Dash nodded slowly, his eyes clouded with thought. "That's all I have to do?"

"For now." A faint sneer crept across Dastarius's face and he lightly flicked his tail. "You might want to speak up more and try to take the lead during this war. After all, you're just as royal as Saderia is. Your name's even on the royal family tree."

A jolt of alarm shot through Dash at the thought of his father knowing about that, but no anger or annoyance shone in Dastarius's eyes. At that point, Dash doubted he would want to hurt him, anyway. Giving him a shrug, he just nodded thoughtfully. "All right. When we start training the forest animals tomorrow, I'll find some way to coach them or help them out."

"Good." A satisfied smirk crossed Dastarius's face. "The most important thing is to make everyone trust you. With you being you, that won't be hard to do."

Dash raised an eyebrow. "Most of the time, the forest animals wouldn't trust me as far as they could throw me."

Dastarius gave an apathetic flick of his tail. "That's only when there's a crisis and they need a scapegoat. Any other time, they like you."

Dash just shook his head and rolled his eyes. "The forest is weird."

"That, it is." Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "Any questions before I pin you to a tree?"

Dash glared at him and instantly dropped down into a fighting stance, flicking his tail playfully back and forth. "I'm ready this time! I'll

beat you for sure!”

Dastarius’s whiskers twitched in amusement. “If you say so.”

Dash just rolled his eyes, but the instant Dastarius leapt to his paws and lunged at him, he dodged to the side just in time to avoid him. Landing neatly on his paws a few paces away, Dash whirled around and sneered at him. “I told you I was prepared!”

His father landed a few paces away and calmly turned to face him, a knowing gleam in his eyes. “Good. But in a real fight, keep the bragging to a minimum unless you know you’ve won. When you brag, it just makes the enemy want to kill you more.”

Dash laughed. “Noted.”

A jolt of shock shot through Saderia the instant her eyes fluttered open. Hazy sand dunes spread out around her, tinged blue by an otherworldly glow. On the horizon, the blurry sand met with a dull blue sky that seemed both dark and light with no stars or sun to show the difference. Blinking rapidly, she gazed at her surroundings and felt a smile creep across her face when her gaze landed on a sparkling light brown spirit sitting a few paces away. “Claw,” she whispered. “Good to see you again. I haven’t seen you in a while. How are things?”

A faint smile crept across Claw’s face, but her light brown eyes seemed clouded with distress. “Hello, Saderia. Things are fine. For the most part, you’re right on track. If you can unite the dingoes and the forest animals, I’m almost certain you’ll be able to win this war. However...I can’t help but think about what this will cost...”

Saderia’s eyes darkened and she looked away. “I know. It’s hard to send the forest animals into battle, but...what choice do I have? It’s wrong to let the outcasts suffer, and the pack’s cruelty has been going on for far too long. It’s about time it was stopped.”

“True.” Claw took a deep breath, her eyes shadowed. “There’s nothing I would like more than to see the pack’s dictator taken down and replaced by a good, peaceful dingo. I just wish there was another way. It seems so wrong that the only way to rid the desert of violence is to *use* violence.” She let out a long sigh and gazed dully at her paws, distressfully flicking her tail. “I feel so conflicted...but I do know this is the right thing

to do. This is the *only* thing you *can* do, and it will help so many animals in the long run..."

Sympathy gleamed in Saderia's eyes. Carefully, she raised a paw and rested it gently on Claw's ghostly shoulder as much as she could when she could just barely feel it. Somehow, Claw was slightly more solid in the spirit realm, so Saderia patted her shoulder reassuringly. "It's hard for me, too, Claw. But evil needs to be stopped."

"It does." Claw's eyes clouded with seriousness. "Rock needs to be stopped fast, so he won't be able to follow in Bone's footsteps and kill more innocent animals. But his followers, the dingoes he's controlling...well, you said it best yourself. They're not evil, they're a product of their society. Not all of them are cruel deep down. If circumstances were different, they might even be on our side. But since they're not, a lot of them will have to die even though they themselves might not truly be evil. Think about Rip and Tear. What if they were still pack members?" A shiver raced down her spine, but she quickly shook herself and looked away. "Never mind. It doesn't help to think like that." Taking a deep breath, she faced Saderia with dark, shadowed brown eyes. "I'm sure it's not helping you either. I didn't come here to talk you out of this. I came here to help you."

Saderia's eyes glimmered with sympathy and regret. "That's okay, Claw. I know this is going to be difficult for you to have to watch."

Claw managed a grateful smile. "Thanks." She paused, then let out a soft sigh. "Anyway, I'm glad you were able to unite the dingoes and the forest animals. Hopefully, they'll grow to like each other, so they'll be able to work together. The only thing you have to do now is keep your eyes open and train your forces. The animals who have volunteered must already have *some* fighting ability, though, so you shouldn't wait too long to go to war. As soon as the dingoes have regained their strength and the forest animals have improved their fighting skills, I think you should send them."

Saderia blinked in surprise. "Why the rush?"

"Because Rock's getting impatient." A dark shadow flitted across the spirit's translucent light brown face. "Dingoes do stupid things when they're bored."

All the fur along Saderia's back rose up in alarm. "Impatient for what?"

Claw heaved a sigh and gazed wearily at her paws. “Saderia, Rock probably already knows you’re going to attack. He might not know the details—like how you united the dingoes and the forest animals—but he knows you’re coming one way or another. He has a sick plan he’s been dying to use, and that plan can’t be put into action unless he gets close to you. Which is why I’m going to say something I would never normally say.” Her brown eyes darkened and a grim shadow crossed her face. “Do whatever you have to do to win this war, and when the time comes, you must kill the pack’s cruel Leader. Rock must die.”

Saderia shuddered and bit her lip nervously. “We have to kill Rock?”

“Yes.” Claw met her gaze gravely, her face empty of emotion and her eyes dark. “Rock is the one who controls the dingoes in the pack. Without him, they’re nothing. They’ll fall apart. They won’t know what to do if no one’s *telling* them what to do. Rock doesn’t have a Second in Command, so the sooner you get rid of him, the sooner the pack will break apart because there will be no one to take Rock’s place when he dies. I know it sounds hypocritical, but in order to avoid massive bloodshed, Rock must be killed immediately. Be sure to keep that in mind while you’re coaching the forest animals.”

Claw paused, then took a deep breath, her eyes grim. “If you don’t kill Rock in the fight, you will lose. I don’t want to make you nervous, but I have to give you the facts. If Rock lives through this battle, he’ll have a chance to use his plan, and if he puts his plan into action, you, your friends, your family, and your forest will be in horrible danger. Rock is not the smartest dingo in the desert, but he has formed a very dangerous plan.”

A shiver raced down Saderia’s spine, but she nodded grimly. “I understand. I’ll...I’ll keep that in mind. Maybe Dingo can advise the outcasts to kill Rock, too, so that they’ll specifically look for him during the fight.”

Claw nodded gravely, then let out a heavy sigh. “War isn’t pretty, Saderia. I’m sorry to lay all of this on you.”

Saderia quickly shook her head, her eyes clouding with sympathy. “No, I need to know all of this. That way, I can win the battle and make sure no more animals get hurt.”

A faint, proud smile crept across Claw’s face. “Good.”

Saderia weakly returned the smile. "Is there anything else I should know?"

Claw hesitated for a long moment, then gazed darkly at her light brown paws. "To be honest, I feel like something is off. Something's not right...But I can't tell what it is. The only thing I can tell you is to keep your eyes open for anything suspicious. I'll do the same."

An uneasy frown spread across Saderia's face, but she nodded slowly. "All right."

Claw managed a weak smile. "I think that under your guidance, your side will win. Just be sure to take care of yourself and your friends, Saderia." She hesitated, then heaved a regretful sigh. "I have to go now. Good luck with training the forest animals."

Saderia let out a soft sigh as the Dream-like sand dunes began to fade and darkness crept over. "Thank you," she murmured into the blackness. "I might need it."

A heavy sigh breathed out of Claw's mouth. Her eyes clouded with weariness. Slumping down on the dull, sandy ground, she gazed at a wispy Seeing Circle carved into the side of a sand dune with dull, listless eyes. Curling her tail over her paws, she stared at the eerily glowing circle and willed the scene in the wispy sphere to change to show her a vision of the forest's meeting place. Since Saderia had disappeared several moments ago, it wouldn't be long before the forest's first training session started. A faint sense of peace hung over the spirit world and she tried to let go of her tension as she gazed at the ghostly circle, letting its otherworldly light wash over her wispy light brown fur. Slowly, the spirit started to relax.

"I take it you're back from a meeting with your living friend."

Claw froze at the sound of the sudden low, dark voice behind her, feeling her paws stiffen with alarm. Slowly, she looked back over her shoulder to see a dark, shadowy spirit standing just a few paces behind her. A flash of unease shot through her translucent body and her eyes narrowed with nervousness, but she didn't make a move to leave. It wasn't as if a ghost could hurt her when she was already dead, after all.

The dark figure lightly flicked his tail. "I suppose you have a plan to help her out."

Claw eyed him warily, but didn't turn around. "Perhaps." Tearing her gaze off the figure, she gazed at the circle, pretending to be uninterested in his eerie presence. "I take it you've been watching the world lately and that you have some plan, as well."

A sneer crept across the spirit's face. "You're as smart as the rumors say, Claw."

Claw's eyes darted back to him, glowing with unease. "You know my name?"

"I know many things," the figure replied, his voice light and smooth.

Claw snorted and rolled her eyes before turning back to gaze down at the glowing circle. "I suppose you won't tell me your name even though you seem to know mine."

A soft sigh escaped his throat. "There's no such thing as fairness, even in death."

Claw just rolled her eyes, but when she dared to look over her shoulder, the figure had vanished. The sleepy dunes were empty of anyone but her. Taking a deep breath, she slowly turned to gaze back at the living world, trying to ignore the nervous shivers racing down her spine. The shadowy ghost was clearly up to no good, but what she could do about it, she didn't know. All she knew was that she had a bad feeling about the spirit.

"Who are you?" she murmured, her eyes glowing with the otherworldly light of the circle. "And just what are you planning?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Training

Thick darkness met Saderia the instant her eyes fluttered open. Shadows crept across the walls of her familiar blue room and shrouded the dark, indistinguishable furniture. Blinking rapidly, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness and heaved a long, weary sigh. The sun had not even risen yet and already she was wide awake. Training was supposed to start at five o'clock, but she guessed it must be at least an hour before then. Great. She couldn't imagine how exhausted she would be by the end of the day.

Taking a deep breath, she slowly pushed aside her soft, blue blanket and leapt down to the shadowed cerulean carpet. Her paws thudded against the floor as she stumbled blindly through the shadows. Reaching out, she felt the smooth wood of her door brush her paw and carefully pushed it open, not making a sound. Shadows covered the hallway, shrouding the fancy walls in darkness. Ignoring the eerie blackness, she crept across the frigid floor and pushed open the door to Dash's room with a soft creak. Inside the dark room, the lion lay on his shadowed blue bed, his dark mane a mess and his brown paws twitching, as if he was having some strange dream.

Blinking to see through the darkness, Saderia staggered over to stand beside his bed and poked him gently in the side. "Dash!" she hissed. "Dash! Wake up!"

The dark lion didn't move even when she poked him a few more times. Only when she shook him roughly did his eyes slowly flutter open. A long yawn escaped his throat and he sleepily turned onto his side, his eyes groggy and unfocused. "S-Saderia?" His eyes flicked tiredly to the shadows of his room and he let out a groan. "What...what time is it?"

She shrugged apathetically. "Probably somewhere around four a.m."

Dash raised his eyebrows. "So you decided it was a good time to wake me up?"

A sheepish smile crossed her face. "Sorry, but we *do* have to leave for a training session soon. Besides, I spoke to Claw and I wanted to talk to you and the others before training started."

Dash let out a soft sigh and slowly rose up to stretch his legs. "All right," he murmured, leaping clumsily to the ground. "I really should get a lock for this room, though."

She hissed and swatted him playfully, while he just snickered. Smiling warmly, Dash flicked her with his tail, then turned and padded toward the door to lead her out of his room.

Side by side, the two stepped out into the shadowed hallway and padded through the darkness. A faint light shone through the blackness when they stepped out into the shadowy front room. Hazy light shone through the arch leading into the dining room, making the two look up in surprise and creep toward the archway to peer into the room. Makero sat alone in one of the chairs pulled up to the gold dining table, his green eyes tired and absent, as if he was staring at something they couldn't see. An untouched plate of food sat on the table in front of him.

A frown spread across Saderia's face. "Dad? You're up, too?"

Makero blinked in surprise and abruptly looked up. "Saderia? What are you doing up?" His eyes narrowed and a flicker of suspicion crept across his face. "You're not..."

"No, I'm not trying to run away." She let out an exasperated sigh. "I just had a Dream and I wanted to talk it over with my friends before the training session. Is that okay?"

Makero narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "How do I know you won't run away?"

"Because we've got a war to plan," she replied, keeping her voice patient. "I'm not going to run off now, not when we have so much to prepare for in such little time."

The King studied her for a long moment with eyes narrowed with suspicion, then finally gave a curt nod. "All right. You can go with your friends, but I expect to see you at the meeting place at five o'clock sharp, or else you will be in a lot of trouble."

Saderia nodded and smiled weakly. "I'll be there. That's where I'm going anyway. We'll pick up Jeb, then head to the clearing, since Dingo's

already there. Jeb might not be too happy about being woken up, but I'm sure Dingo's already awake. He usually is."

Makero took a deep breath, his eyes dull with worry. "All right. Have fun."

Saderia gave him a faint smile, then turned to walk to the front door, trying to push away a sense of guilt. Hopefully, one day her father would be able to trust her again...

Shaking the thoughts out of her head, she padded across the dark front room with Dash close behind her and silently pushed open the front door. A blast of frigid air washed over her the instant the door creaked open, ruffling her fur and sending shivers racing through her. Fluffing up her fur, she narrowed her eyes against the chilly wind and stiffly crept onto the frigid grass, trying to ignore the biting cold. The chilly air was better than the desert's heat anyway.

Letting out a sigh, she padded across the dewy grass of the clearing around her home and headed toward the dirt path with Dash close beside her. With any luck, Jeb's parents would push aside their fears and let their son follow them to the meeting place. Only with all of her friends around her could Saderia start to make sense of everything she had been told. Only then could she come up with a decent plan to make sure victory would be hers.

Stars twinkled in the black sky, casting silvery light down on the dark clearing in front of Dingo and Jeb's rocky houses. Shadows crept across the worn-down trail leading to their front doors. With Dash close beside her, Saderia crept across the dirt path and stopped when she stood in front of the wooden door to Jeb's tiny house. Unease crept into her eyes and she hesitated. Knocking would wake Jeb's whole family, and she wasn't entirely sure if his parents would let him go with them after he had already run away once.

Taking a deep breath, she shook off her worries and knocked on the door. Inside, she could hear the faint murmur of voices, but couldn't pick out any words. The voices stopped abruptly at the sound of her knocking. A few minutes later, the door creaked open and Jeb's father, Telku, poked his head out through the crack, his eyes bright with unease.

Saderia managed a weak smile and waved weakly. "Greetings, Telku. I know it's really early and I apologize if I woke you up, but Dash and I were hoping Jeb could come talk to us before training started. We wanted to discuss the war a bit..."

Telku nodded tersely, his eyes fearful and his face tense. "Yes, I understand."

A shrill voice shrieked from inside the house. "Don't let him out! He'll run away!"

Telku heaved a weary sigh. "No, he won't, Jati. Not when they're planning that war."

"Which Jeb *won't* be a part of!" Jati screamed from somewhere inside the den.

Telku looked away and tried to hide a flicker of worry. "That's his decision. Jati, please calm down."

Jati let out a furious hiss. "If he gets hurt, someone's going to pay!" With a cold growl, the female kraguer fell silent and a tense quiet crept over the clearing.

Letting out a soft sigh, Telku gave Saderia a weak smile, then crept back into the house and vanished from sight. A few moments later, Jeb peeked out through the crack in the doorway and awkwardly shuffled outside, giving his friends a sheepish glance.

"Sorry about that," he murmured, closing the dark door softly behind him and offering them an embarrassed shrug. "My parents have a tendency to...overreact."

Saderia let out a soft sigh. "It's okay, Jeb. We understand."

Jeb nodded slowly, then gazed up at them curiously, his blue and green eyes narrowing with wonder and unease. "So why did you guys come here so early? What's going on?"

Dash shrugged and lightly flicked his tail. "Saderia talked to Dingo's ghost sister last night about war tactics, so now we want to discuss it with you and Dingo."

Saderia rolled her eyes. As if that were normal. Shaking her head, she glanced at Jeb curiously. "Speaking of which, Jeb, will you be joining the fight or staying behind?"

Jeb's eyes widened in alarm. "Do...Do you guys want me to join the fight?"

Saderia shrugged, her eyes darkening. "It's not a matter of wanting *anybody* to fight. To be honest, I don't want anyone to fight, but we don't have a choice. I understand if you don't want to join the battle, though, and I'm not going to make you. It's a very dangerous situation, and if you're not up to it, I get it. But I still want to talk to you about it."

Jeb nodded slowly, trying to hide the unease in his blue/green eyes. "Okay. I...I'll have to think about it some more. But I will come with you to talk about it."

"Good. That's all I ask for now." She gave him a weak smile, then gazed back at the shadowy woods. Flicking her tail, she gestured for her friends to follow as she crept along the worn trail. "Come on. Let's go see what Dingo's up to. Maybe he's actually sleeping for once."

Dash snickered as he fell into step behind her. "I suppose anything's possible."

Moonlight shone down through the thick, leafy canopy, bathing the wide clearing in silver light. Darkness covered the dense woods surrounding the meeting place and shadows danced across the cool grass. A soft breeze whistled through the forest, rustling the leaves and filling the clearing with a soft, peaceful sound. Shadowed, moonlit dingoes lay all across the grass, deep in sleep. Their scarred sides rose and fell with each breath. Only a few canines were awake. Several crept curiously around the clearing, investigating and being careful not to make a sound. The black pup, Bunny, poked around the outskirts of the clearing to investigate, her amber eyes round with curiosity.

Dingo prowled around on top of the makeshift stage at the head of the clearing, gazing out at the sleeping dingoes with gleaming light brown eyes. On the dark, woodsy edge of the clearing, Saderia signaled for Dash and Jeb to follow her, then padded across the sleepy clearing toward the stage. The soft thud of her paws made Dingo's ears prick up in surprise. Turning, he glanced in their direction and grinned when he saw them. Hiding a grin of her own, Saderia waved back and carefully padded up the rough, uneven steps onto the stage.

Dingo gazed up at the black night sky as the three of them sat down beside him near the back of the stage. A frown spread across his face. "Is it time to train already?"

“No, we’re early,” Saderia replied, giving him a faint smile. “I just wanted to talk to all of you before we got started.”

Dingo nodded thoughtfully and lightly sat back on the stage. “About what? A Dream?”

Saderia shrugged awkwardly and looked away. “Er...kind of.”

“She talked to Claw,” Dash explained, flicking Saderia lightly with his tail.

“Ah.” Dingo flicked his tail and met her gaze with a knowing, thoughtful expression. “All right. What did she say?”

Saderia cast an anxious glance over her shoulder and sighed in relief when she realized all the outcasts in the moonlit clearing were either sleeping or paying no attention to them. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she leaned closer to her friends and carefully explained everything Claw had told her. Her friends listened intently to every word, their eyes thoughtful. When she finished her story, she eyed them curiously, waiting to hear what they thought.

A grim shadow crept over Dingo’s face. “So Rock has some great master plan, huh? That’s not good. You should never give stupid dingoes a lot of power.”

Dash nodded seriously, his amber eyes narrowed with curiosity and unease. “It must be bad if Claw said it could put our whole forest in danger.”

Jeb’s eyes widened in alarm and confusion. “What’s it go to do with us? I thought that Rock guy was after the dingoes.”

“We’re allied with them now.” Dash’s eyes darkened. “If they fall, we fall.”

Saderia nodded silently. What Dash said was true. Allying her forest with the outcasts meant their well-being depended on the dingoes. In the back of her mind, though, an eerie voice told her that Rock’s plan had more to do with the forest than she thought, and not just because she was helping the outcasts. How exactly his plan related to her, she didn’t know. All she knew was that she didn’t want Rock to live long enough for her to find out.

Dingo’s eyes clouded grimly, as if he had read her thoughts. “So Rock has to die...” The canine paused, then gazed around at his friends with narrowed eyes, a dark, cold gleam in his light brown irises. “I’m not

going to be the one to kill him,” he growled, making everyone look up in surprise. His eyes flashed. “I’m sick of being the bad guy.”

Saderia let out a soft sigh and rested her tail gently on his shoulder. “No one’s asking you to be the bad guy, Dingo. You don’t have to be the one to kill Rock.”

“Good. Because I’m not going to.” Dingo’s gaze hardened and his monotone voice grew curt with firmness and finality. His eyes bored into hers, shadowed and unreadable in the darkness of the night. “I’ve got enough blood on my paws as it is.”

“I understand.” She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, glancing nervously at her paws. “I guess that means I’ll have to be the one to do it.” A shiver crept down her spine as she spoke. She had never had to...kill someone before. Her father had been the one to kill Dastarius, and Dingo had killed Bone. Even if she knew it was for the best, she couldn’t wrap her mind around the thought of ending someone’s life. Maybe it was the only way to ensure everyone’s safety, but the thought seemed unthinkable to her. With a shudder, she wondered if she could actually do it when the time came...

Sympathy flashed in Dash’s eyes and he rested his tail softly on her shoulder. “You don’t have to, Saderia.” He paused, then narrowed his eyes and coolly flicked his tail. “I can do it.”

Dingo hid a grin. “You, Dash?” His eyebrows shot up in amusement and he tried not to laugh. “You couldn’t kill a fly!”

Dash flattened his ears and shot him a glare. “I could so!”

Dingo snickered and grinned. “Yeah, right!”

“I could kill him just as much as you could!” Dash lashed his tail in fury and hissed at Dingo. “You’ll see! When we go to war, I’ll be the one to kill him!”

Dingo rolled his eyes and chuckled to himself. “If you say so. But we’ll have Saderia or someone standing by just in case.”

Jeb gazed up at Dash in surprise. “You really think you can...kill him?”

“Of course I can,” Dash snapped, shooting him an annoyed glare and lashing his tail in frustration. “It’s just one dingo. It’s not that big a deal.”

Dingo just grinned. “We’ll see how big a deal it is when you chicken out.”

Dash shot him a furious glare. “You shut up, Dingo! You think you’re so great...”

“Guys!” Saderia lashed her tail and shot them an annoyed glare, her eyes flashing. “Would you knock it off? Stop talking about killing! Do you know what you guys sound like? How can you talk about this so frivolously? It’s not right to sit here and fight over who gets to kill Rock like a bunch of barbarians! If we do, we’re no better than him!”

Dingo narrowed his eyes in shame, his ears drooping. “Sorry,” he muttered.

Dash let out a long sigh and gazed down at his paws, his eyes narrowing in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, too. You’re right. This isn’t right...”

A tense, uncomfortable silence fell over the four of them.

After a long moment of hesitation, Dash slowly looked up and let out a long, weary sigh. “So who *will* kill Rock? I don’t think any of us really *want* to do it.”

Saderia took a deep breath and gazed darkly up at the sky. “I suppose...”

“I’ll do it.”

All four friends whipped around in surprise at the sound of the soft voice. A yellow brown dingo froze in his tracks when all eyes locked on him. Pausing on the edge of the stage, the outcast hesitated, then slowly stepped closer to them, an apologetic gleam in his dark brown eyes. Moonlight dappled his face when he moved closer. Relief washed over Saderia when she recognized the dingo’s familiar face and realized it was only Thunder.

The outcast Leader glanced uncomfortably at his paws when he stood just a few paces away, his dark eyes narrowed with unease. “I’m sorry...I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation, and...if Rock has to die, then I’ll do it. I’ll be the one to kill him.”

Dingo let out a soft sigh of relief. “Problem solved.”

Saderia shot him a cold glare, then gave Thunder a softer, more sympathetic glance. “Are you sure?”

Thunder took a deep breath and nodded wearily, avoiding her eyes. "It's personal for me. If the only way to get our life back is to kill Rock, then I'll do it."

A bittersweet smile crossed Saderia's face. "Good. I think the only way for us to win is for Rock's pack to fall, and the only way it will fall is if its Leader is taken out. When the war starts, the most important thing will be to find Rock and get rid of him. The sooner he's dead, the sooner the war will be over and the sooner you and your outcasts will be free."

Thunder let out a soft sigh. "All right. As soon as the war begins, I'll look for Rock." He paused, then looked down in embarrassment. "I'm sorry for eavesdropping."

"No, it's okay." Saderia gave him a faint smile. The fact that he had overheard them sent a jolt of unease through her, but she guessed he hadn't heard them discussing Claw. If he had, he would have had a lot more questions...Shaking off her thoughts, she flicked him lightly with her tail. "You can stay if you want. We're discussing battle tactics."

Thunder's eyes widened in surprise. "Are...Are you sure?"

"Of course." Dingo instantly scooted over and patted the spot next to him with his tail, gesturing for him to sit. "*You're* the outcasts' Leader. You should hear this, too."

"Oh..." Thunder blinked several times. "Right. I...I guess I am." He paused, then nervously sat down beside Dingo, his ears twitching with discomfort and unease.

Dash glanced curiously at Thunder, then gazed at his friends with wondering amber eyes. "So how long do you think we should wait before we actually go to war?"

Saderia narrowed her eyes in thought and frowned. "Well... depending on how well training goes, I think we should only wait about a week."

Thunder's eyes widened in shock. "A week?"

"Yes, a week." Saderia's eyes glowed knowingly. "The dingoes already know how to fight and by the time a week goes by, they will have regained their strength. By that time, the forest animals will have touched up on the battle skills they have, as well." She paused thoughtfully. "I think we should strike early. I have a...feeling that if we wait too long, Rock will do something drastic, something dangerous..." Her eyes flashed and she

shared a secret glance with her friends to let them know Claw had told her that.

Catching the gleam in her eyes, Dingo gave her a faint nod to show he understood, then glanced calmly up at Thunder. "Saderia's probably right. The sooner, the better."

Alarm glimmered in Thunder's eyes, but he said nothing and merely nodded in agreement, trying to hide his unease. "Okay...If you think that's best."

"I do." Saderia heaved a long, weary sigh. "I just hope we win. If we don't...I have a 'feeling' Rock will do something really bad."

"We'll win." Dash rested his paw firmly on her shoulder, his eyes bright with determination. "With the forest animals and the dingoes combined, Rock won't stand a chance."

A weak smile crossed her face, but it didn't meet her eyes. "I hope you're right."

"I want every forest animal to pair up with a dingo." Makero's commanding voice rang out through the clearing, echoing in the chilly air. Every forest animal in the clearing instantly gazed up at the King, then peered curiously around the meeting place to search for a partner. The soft murmur of conversation floated up into the air.

The King stood atop the rough stage at the head of the clearing, gazing around at the vast meeting place with eyes glowing with determination. Saderia and Dash sat beside him, staring out at the animals with shining amber irises. Dozens of forest animals sat on the left side of the clearing. Though it was a lot less than the number of animals who had been at the meeting, the number of forest animals who had volunteered was surprisingly large. On the other side of the clearing sat the enormous crowd of outcasts. Reluctantly, the two groups started to shuffle toward each other to find a partner, their faces uneasy. Saderia watched the animals cautiously creep up to each other and ask to be partners. Her eyes glowed brilliantly in the faint, dawning light of the rising sun.

At the back of the clearing, Jeb and his parents watched the animals with nervous eyes. Catching her gaze, her tiny friend gave her a weak smile but couldn't hide his unease at being around so many 'strange creatures.' Earlier that day, Saderia had told him that he and his parents could watch

the training session to decide what they wanted to do. None of the three kraguers wanted to fight or thought they would be of much use, but Jeb had still wanted to watch the training to see if there was anything he could do.

Tearing her gaze off the kraguers, Saderia looked up at her father and grinned. A brilliant light of determination shone in the King's eyes. Flicking his tail eagerly, Makero watched as the dingoes and forest animals slowly crowded together to seek out partners. A few animals hung back uncertainly as the others paired up.

Makero faced the clearing with shining eyes. "You will get used to working with each other. For dingoes who don't have a partner, my family and I will be joining you. You may partner with us. Others, pair up with a forest animal, if you can. There are uneven numbers of us, so any dingoes left over are free to partner with their own kind."

Saderia's eyes flicked toward the back of the stage as he spoke. Behind her, Cia and Uncle Jash hovered near the back of the stage, eyeing the canines in the grassy clearing with uneasy blue eyes, as if fearing having to fight with the once barbaric animals. Sympathy gleamed in Saderia's eyes. Neither her aunt nor her uncle were really meant for combat. Tearing her eyes off them, she gazed back at the clearing and managed a smile when Dash caught her eye and flicked her reassuringly with his tail.

Makero turned to face the yellow brown dingo standing a few feet away on the edge of the stage. Thunder gazed nervously out at the crowd, his dark brown eyes uneasy. Catching his gaze, Makero smiled. "I will partner with Leader Thunder, if he accepts."

The outcast Leader hesitated, then gave him a grave nod and turned away.

Gazing back out at the clearing, Makero flicked his tail toward Saderia and his family members and smiled. "Saderia, Dash, Cia, Jash... choose your partners."

A playful sneer crossed Dash's face and his amber eyes glowed as he faced the crowd. "Dingo."

Near the middle of the crowd of outcasts, Dingo looked up and grinned. A challenging gleam lit up his eyes and he gestured to him with a grin, as if to say, "Bring it."

Saderia smiled and gave Dash a playful flick of her tail. Turning, she stepped up to the edge of the stage and gazed around at the crowd

curiously, searching for a suitable partner. Her eyes fell on a scarred, blood red face in the center of the outcast crowd and she smiled faintly. "Rip."

The lanky red dingo looked up sharply, his yellow eyes flashing in surprise.

"Is that okay?" Saderia added, giving him a faint smile.

Rip hesitated uncertainly, then nodded without saying a word.

At a nod from Makero, Cia nervously crept up to the front of the stage and gazed out at the crowd. Fear glowed in her eyes and she shrank back from the curious gazes of the dingoes. "Um..." Her voice faltered and she bit her lip as she gazed around the clearing, searching for the least dangerous-looking dingo. "H-how about that yellow one over there?" she stammered, her eyes falling on a skinny yellow dog. Unease clouded her eyes. "How...how old is he?" Clearly, she didn't want to fight someone younger than herself.

"It doesn't matter," Saderia whispered, leaning closer to her aunt. "Dingoes kind of mature fast. The outcast Leader himself is only twelve. Rock, too. That's Lightning, by the way," she added, gesturing to the lanky yellow dingo. "He's twelve, like they are."

Cia nodded uncertainly and nervously met the eyes of the yellow dog. "I guess I'll partner with him then. If...if that's okay, that is."

Lightning smiled and dipped his head. "It would be an honor."

A faint smile crept across Cia's face and she nodded quickly, seeming to relax.

Makero grinned and glanced back at his brother-in-law. "Jash?"

Uncle Jash narrowed his eyes uncertainly and inched closer to the front of the stage. "Uh...What about that orange one?" Nervously, he pointed to the plump, yellow orange Tear, who sat close beside his brothers, Dingo and Rip. "Would that be okay?"

Tear frowned uneasily and hesitated.

Seeing his nervous expression, Dingo grinned and gave his older brother a playful flick of his tail. "What's the matter? Too scared to fight a forest animal?"

Tear flattened his ears at Dingo and shot Rip a withering glare when he snickered. Rolling his eyes, he turned and faced Saderia's uncle with a soft sigh. "That's fine."

Makero smiled eagerly. “Those who are left, find a partner.” His words rang out as the last forest animals and dingoes paired up. The remaining outcasts gravitated toward their friends before turning to face the King. Makero gazed out at the legions of animals before him with a confident smile. “For the next few hours, you will face off. You will fight with *no claws* and *no fangs*. The goal is not to hurt your partner, but to practice your skills. Accidental wounds are excusable, but if anyone purposely wounds their partners, there will be serious consequences. Leader Thunder and I are not afraid to hand down punishments.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Makero glanced at Thunder, waiting patiently for his response. The Leader caught his gaze and gave him a grim nod, his eyes shadowed.

Dipping his head to Thunder, Makero gazed out with gleaming eyes. “The purpose of this training session is to see how strong a fighter you are. From this session, we will be able to judge how we can train you to make your skills more effective. Leader Thunder and I will walk around as you are practicing and watch to see how good you are. At the end, we’ll know what skills we have as a whole. Each of you are responsible for measuring the strength of your skills and figuring out how useful they will be in battle.”

A grave shadow crept across his face. “As soon as I finish speaking, training will officially begin. This session will last until sundown. If, at the end, you’ve decided that this is too much—that you won’t want to do this again—leave our sessions and don’t come back. If you *do* come to the next practice session, be aware that you are not allowed to back out later on. Your coming to the next session will act as your agreement to stick with us. Think carefully before you come to the next session. If you show up, you have a commitment to come to every session and fight in the war. No exceptions. No excuses.”

A heavy silence fell over the crowd. Some of the animals exchanged nervous glances. Others just nodded grimly, their eyes dark as they gazed up at the forest King.

Makero gazed around at the clearing, then smiled. “Begin practicing!”

Instantly, forest animals and dingoes faced each other and leapt into battle. Shouts erupted from the clearing as the crowd burst into a frenzy of

fighting. Forest animals and dingoes tumbled to the ground or raced across the sparse grass, swiping at each other and growling. Howling and hissing canines and felines spread out all throughout the clearing to the very edges where trees rose up and sheltered them with bright canopies of leaves. Animals all over the clearing lashed out at each other in a wild blur of movement.

All of Saderia's muscles tensed at the sudden eruption of battles all throughout the clearing. When she peered closely at the fighting animals, though, she started to relax. No malice gleamed in the eyes of the fighters and all of them seemed careful not to hurt each other. An air of playfulness and determination hung over the clearing.

Catching her eye, Dash flicked her playfully with his tail and grinned, angling his ears toward the battling crowd. "Come on. We had better get started."

"Right." A faint smile crept across her face and she nodded to Dash.

Side by side, the two lunged off the stage and landed neatly on the prickly ground. Excitement glowed in their eyes as they bounded into the heart of the clearing to find Dingo and his brothers. Crowds of fighting canines and forest animals swirled past them on either side, hissing or growling playfully and batting at each other with their paws. Two animals tumbled past them as they weaved through the crowds. Dozens of animals lunging toward each other and batting at each other with careful movements swirled past Saderia's eyes as she stared out at the sea of fighting, searching for Dingo, Rip, and Tear. "I bet two pieces of food I beat the tiger."

Saderia's whiskers twitched in amusement at the sound of the familiar voice. Looking up, she pushed past two fighting animals and grinned when she spotted the three brothers. Rip stood a few feet in front of her, facing his brothers with a grin and an eagerly twitching tail. Dingo and Tear sat in front of him with raised eyebrows, their brown and yellow eyes gleaming with amusement. Around them, animals tumbled across the clearing, locked in friendly fights.

Dingo grinned and flicked Rip with his tail. "Okay, I'll take you up on that. I bet *three* pieces of food that *she* beats *you*."

"I'll bet three that she beats you in *two seconds*," Tear added, leering at his brother.

Rip shot them an indignant glare, trying to hide the amusement in his eyes. "You guys are jerks! But fine. You're both going to owe me three pieces each when I win."

Dingo just grinned and laughed. "We'll see about that."

Rip sneered. "How about you and the little lion? *Ten* pieces of food he beats you!"

"Dash?" Dingo scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. Ten pieces *I* beat *him*."

"Hey!" Dash flattened his ears and bounded closer with Saderia close behind him. The lion skidded to a halt in front of the brothers and glared at Dingo, his fur bristling but his eyes gleaming with playfulness. A grin crept across his face despite his indignant glare. "You can't make bets!"

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "I didn't hear the King say anything against it."

Saderia's amber eyes gleamed with amusement. "He's right, you know."

Hiding a grin, Dash whipped around to face her in disbelief. "Whose side are you on?"

Saderia laughed and flicked him lightly with her tail. Trying to hide a bright grin, she gazed up at Rip and raised an eyebrow. "So...you think you can beat me, huh?"

Rip grinned and flicked his tail eagerly back and forth. "I know so, tiger. I'll beat you this time! What's her name?" he added, glancing back at Dingo with curious yellow eyes. "Saderia?" When Dingo nodded, Rip snickered and grinned, his yellow eyes lighting up with excitement. With a faint, condescending smile, he rested his paw mockingly on Dingo's shoulder. "Okay, little brother, let me show you how it's done!"

Without another word, he lunged at Saderia with a playful howl. Hiding a grin, Saderia instantly leapt away just as Rip hit the ground. Alarm tickled her paws as the red dingo whipped around to face her, but she ignored it. After fighting Rip too many times to count, an instinctual hint of unease lingered in her mind, but she swept it away. Unlike the high-paced, high-stakes fights of the past, this fight wouldn't end in her death if she lost.

Growling playfully, Rip lunged at her and landed inches in front of her. In a flash, he swiped a paw at her, but she ducked to avoid it. Weaving

away from another attack, she lashed out with sheathed claws and hit him lightly on the cheek. Instantly, a loud howl tore out of Rip's chest and he suddenly staggered back, clutching his cheek as if in awful pain. Saderia's eyes widened in alarm and she glanced sharply at her paw to see if she had somehow unsheathed her claws. Her eyes shone with confusion and alarm until she realized he was faking.

The shaggy red dingo staggered across the ground with a fake grimace of pain. "You've killed me, tiger!" he exclaimed in a choked voice. Pretending to stagger around in a dizzy circle, he collapsed and rolled onto his side, closing his eyes and letting his tongue loll out of his mouth as if he were dead. Dingo and Tear snickered at their brother's dramatic display and let out jeering howls. Saderia just rolled her eyes. Rip, always the prankster...

Hiding a grin, she stalked toward the fallen dingo to put her paw on his neck to signal she had won. Before she could touch him, though, Rip's eyes flew open and he sprung to his feet. "Just kidding!" Snickering, he lashed out and lightly struck her face. When she stumbled back in surprise, he followed rapidly, never slowing down. The lanky dog struck her shoulder, then lunged and grazed her leg lightly with his fangs when she stumbled. Not wasting a moment, he started to strike again, but before he could hit her, she ducked and slammed into his leg to unbalance him while his other paw was still in the air.

A yelp of surprise escaped Rip's mouth and his eyes widened as he stumbled to the ground. Moving as quickly as possible and taking advantage of his surprise, Saderia lunged onto the red dingo when he tumbled to the ground. Before he could fight back and push her off, she slapped her paw down over his throat to signal that she had won.

Dingo and Tear burst out laughing, while Rip stared up at her with eyes wide with shock, as if confused as to what had just happened. Rolling his eyes, he pushed her off and pulled himself quickly to his paws. Whipping around, he gaped at his two brothers as they howled with laughter, his yellow eyes glowing with disbelief. "What?" he exclaimed, lashing his tail. "What are you laughing about? I still have a chance to beat her!"

Dingo scoffed. "No way, *big brother*. If this was a real fight, you'd be dead!"

“Yeah,” Tear snickered, leering at Rip. “You owe us both three pieces of food!”

“I do not! I still get a chance!” Rip lashed his tail and glared in indignation. “She just got a lucky shot, that’s all! If this was a real fight, I’d still have a chance!”

Dingo snickered and shot him a playful glare. “No, you wouldn’t!”

“Yeah, stop trying to cheat!” Tear echoed, sneering at him. “The tiger beat you!”

Rip gaped in mock horror. “The tiger *can’t* beat me! I have a reputation to protect!”

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “What reputation?”

“Really.” Tear snickered and sneered at his older brother. “Your reputation is one of being crude and annoying. You really want to protect that?”

Rip shot him a glare. “Shut up, Tear! No one asked your opinion.”

“It wasn’t an opinion,” Tear retorted, flicking his ears. “What I said was *pure fact*!”

“I said shut up!” Rip narrowed his eyes and shot a quick glance at Saderia, who sat watching the exchange with amused eyes. Annoyance gleamed in Rip’s yellow eyes and he whipped back around to face his brothers in indignation. “I demand a rematch!”

Dingo shrugged. “Go ahead. We don’t mind seeing you get beat again.”

Rip lashed his tail in annoyance and tried to hide a grin. “Oh, look who’s all high and mighty over here. I’d like to see you beat the lion.”

Dingo just laughed and flicked his tail. “If you insist.”

Dash flattened his ears and grinned. “I’d like to see you beat me, too, Dingo!”

“Looks like I’m about to make everyone happy then.” A playful grin spread across Dingo’s face and his eyes flashed with excitement as he lunged toward Dash.

In a flash, Dash leapt out of the way seconds before Dingo hit the ground where he had stood. Landing neatly, he whirled around just as Dingo whipped around and raced toward him to attack. Dodging a swipe of his paw, Dash smacked him lightly across the face. Dingo winced to pretend he was hurt, then feigned to the left to try to sneak around him and

cuff him over the head. Dash was too fast, though. Every time Dingo tried to sneak around him or get closer, he shoved him away. Rolling his eyes, Dingo sneered, then lunged right at him and slammed into him, sending Dash tumbling to the ground with a cry of surprise. Both of them collapsed to the ground and instantly lashed out to try to pin the other down.

Playfulness gleamed in Dingo's eyes as he batted at Dash, and the same light glow shone in Dash's eyes. As Saderia watched, though, the playfulness slowly seemed to die from Dash's amber eyes. A shadow crossed his face and a darker glow of fury and determination burned in his amber irises. When Dingo lightly tried to push him down, Dash roughly shoved him away. Confusion dawned in Dingo's eyes, but he didn't pause and instantly leapt to his paws to fight back. Hastily, Dash tried to stagger to his paws, but Dingo leapt at him before he could move and shoved him to the ground. The dog raised a paw to cuff him on the head and signal the final blow, but before he could move, a growl rumbled in Dash's throat. With a snarl, Dash raked his paw across Dingo's face, claws unsheathed.

A surprised yelp escaped Dingo's throat. Jumping back, he staggered away, his eyes wide with surprise. Blood dripped from five long cuts across his muzzle. Before Dingo could react, Dash leapt to his paws and lunged at him, taking advantage of his surprise. With a cool look of triumph, the dark lion pinned him to the ground.

Rip let out a whoop of satisfaction and practically leapt into the air in excitement. "Ha!" he shouted. "You got beat, too, Dingo!"

Ignoring Rip, Saderia stared at Dash in shock. Concern darkened her eyes. Biting her lip, she raced over to her two friends and frowned, lashing her tail sharply. "Dash, get off him! The fight is over."

Dash blinked several times, as if coming out of a trance. Looking around in bewilderment, he hesitated, then slowly stepped away from Dingo. His clouded eyes darted uneasily to his paws when Dingo picked himself up and shot Dash a confused glance.

Alarm shone in Saderia's eyes when she saw blood on Dingo's face. "Are you okay?"

Dingo blinked several times, then pressed a paw against his muzzle where Dash had scratched him. When he pulled his paw back to look at it, his shaggy brown fur was dripping with blood. Narrowing his eyes in

confusion, he shook the blood off his paw, then simply shrugged and chuckled. "I'm fine. It's not like I'm going to die from it."

She narrowed her eyes uncertainly, unable to share his light-heartedness. A creepy feeling nagged at the back of her mind. Something about the way Dash's eyes had darkened before he had attacked unnerved her. Shaking it off, she whipped around to face Dash and sternly narrowed her eyes. "Why did you scratch him? Dad said no claws!"

Dash shrugged sheepishly. "I don't know. I guess my claws slipped. I'm sorry!" he added, shrinking back at her stern expression. "I guess I'm just so used to fighting with my claws, it's second nature. It's not like I meant to scratch him! He's my friend!"

Saderia lashed her tail and started to snap at him again, but Dingo just laughed and rested his paw reassuringly on her shoulder. "Relax, Saderia. It was just a slip. It's not like I'm bleeding to death or anything." Dingo grinned at her, then glanced back at his two brothers and glared at them in mock anger when he realized they were laughing.

Practically rolling on the ground, Rip howled with laughter, while Tear sat back and watched him with raised eyebrows, slowly shaking his head.

Dingo rolled his eyes and hid a grin. "All right, Rip, you get your ten pieces."

"All *right*!" Rip exclaimed, sneering at Dingo in between snickers and leering at him with yellow eyes glowing with amusement. "I'm not the only one who got beat here!"

Dingo just shook his head and grinned. "Go ahead and laugh it up, Rip."

"I am!" Snickering to himself, Rip leered at him. "You just got killed by forest food!"

Dingo just rolled his eyes and laughed. Beside him, Dash sneered in amusement.

Saderia's eyes narrowed uneasily. Trying to put on a more playful expression, she tried to lighten up, but a dark sense of worry and disquiet lingered in the back of her mind. Dash never scratched anyone unless he was in a life-threatening situation. Second nature or not, why had he suddenly lashed out at Dingo as if he were in a real fight?

Shaking it off, she started to speak, then paused when she heard paw steps behind her. Looking back, she blinked in surprise, then smiled when she saw who had made the sound. Uncle Jash hesitantly crept up behind her, his blue eyes uneasy. Hiding his worry, he managed a faint smile when he saw Saderia and gave her a friendly wave. "How's training going?"

Saderia tried to smile back at her uncle. "Fine, but..."

Before she could say a word about Dash, Uncle Jash's gaze flicked to Dingo's scratched face and his eyes widened in surprise. "What happened?" he asked, tipping his head to the side. "I thought Makero said not to fight with claws."

Dingo grinned and flicked Dash lightly with his tail. "Blame him."

Dash shot him a glare. "Hey, it's not my fault you're too weak to beat forest food!"

"Ooh!" Rip's eyes glowed with amusement. "Even *he* called you a wimp!"

Dingo narrowed his eyes in a playful glare. "All right, I think I've had enough mockery today!" Baring his fangs, he lunged at Dash and slammed into him, sending them tumbling to the ground. Locking their paws on each other's shoulders, the two rolled across the ground, growling playfully. Saderia tensed and gritted her teeth, but neither Dash nor Dingo tried to hurt each other as they tumbled across the grass.

Howling with excitement, Rip raced toward them to watch the fight, while Tear trailed close behind him. The two of them gathered around the snarling animals, cheering for Dash and shouting taunts at Dingo. His whiskers twitching in amusement, Uncle Jash sat back to watch the fight and grinned faintly. Through the crowd gathered around them, Saderia saw Dingo flip Dash onto his back with a rough thud and club him over the head.

The dark brown lion glared up at him and hissed, but Dingo simply laughed, his light brown eyes gleaming in the bright morning light. "Beat you!"

Dash shot him a playful glare. "Maybe this time!"

"Best two out of three!" Rip shouted. "Twenty pieces the lion wins!"

When Saderia glanced at Dingo's brother, even she couldn't help but grin. Clearly, Rip was getting into it. His eyes gleamed with excitement and his tail lashed eagerly back and forth. The shaggy red dingo actually

bounced up and down in exhilaration, never taking his eyes off the fight and grinning a sloppy grin. Beside him, Tear rolled his eyes at his older brother.

Pulling himself to his paws, Dash dusted himself off and faced Dingo with a bright, challenging grin. "I could back him up on that."

"Bring it on then!" Dingo jeered, his light brown eyes glowing with determination.

Instantly, the two leapt at each other, while Rip and Tear crowded around them, cheering at the top of their lungs. Saderia rolled her eyes and hid a grin. "Boys..." Shaking her head, she turned away from her growling friends and gazed around at the wide clearing. All around her, animals crashed into one another or staggered across the ground, swiping at each other and letting out playful hisses. Everyone seemed to be holding their own against their opponents.

Excitement glowed in her eyes. Nearly all of the forest animals seemed strong. Both they and the dingoes seemed equally matched. When her eyes lingered on individual pairs of battling animals, she realized just how advanced their moves were. All the forest animals needed was to tune up their abilities and learn a few more moves. All the dingoes needed was to regain their strength. After that, her forces would be equally matched with Rock's, and they would have a good chance of beating the dingo tyrant once and for all.

Her eyes flitted around the clearing. Swinging around, she gazed at the hordes of growling, battling animals, then paused when she spotted the vibrant yellow fur of Jeb a few paces away. The creature stumbled quickly toward her, swerving nervously around battling animals and shivering in unease. Looking up, he met her gaze and swiftly hurried over to her.

A weak smile of relief crossed his face when he skidded to a halt in front of her. "Hi, Saderia. How are things going?"

Saderia shrugged and lightly flicked her tail as he sat down in front of her. "Pretty well."

Jeb nodded absently, his bicolor eyes clouded with unease. He hesitated for a long moment, then cautiously looked up, his eyes wondering. "Is...Is there anything I can do?"

Saderia blinked in surprise. Before she could say anything, Dingo stumbled away from his fight with Dash and glanced back over his shoulder with a hopeful smile.

“You can get me a bucket of water!” he called. “I’m thirsty!”

“Make that two buckets!” Dash called, glancing back at Jeb. “I’m parched!”

Jeb winced and shrank back, his eyes clouding with embarrassment and sadness. Heaving a sigh, he slowly turned to pad away, his tail dragging miserably on the ground.

Saderia’s eyes narrowed with sympathy, while Dash and Dingo simply turned and leapt at each other once again, oblivious to their friend’s sadness. Saderia’s mind whirled with wonder as she watched Jeb slink away. What exactly *could* the tiny creature do to help out in the war when he couldn’t fight? As she wondered, a small idea crept into the back of her mind, making her amber eyes light up with hope. Maybe there was a way Jeb could help in the war...

“Jeb!” she called, shaking off her thoughts and chasing after him. “Wait up!”

He paused and looked back in surprise. “What? Do you want something, too?”

A smile crept across her face. “No, Jeb. But I think I know how you can help.”

Jeb frowned, his eyes clouding with misunderstanding. Not bothering to explain, she flicked him with her tail, then darted away, signaling for him to follow. Hastily, he darted after her, struggling to keep up as she bounded across the clearing. With Jeb close behind her, Saderia weaved between pairs of fighting animals and raced into the crowd, searching for one animal. Excitement lit up her eyes when she spotted the one she was looking for.

Makero padded through the fighting crowds, his green eyes calm and curious. Thunder walked close beside him, eyeing the fighting pairs of animals curiously. Side by side, the two rulers padded through the clearing, studying their recruits with thoughtful gazes.

Flicking Jeb quickly with her tail, Saderia bounded toward her father and skidded to a halt just in front of the King and the outcast Leader.

Makero blinked in shock and paused when he spotted her. “Saderia? What is it? Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” Saderia’s eyes gleamed and the idea kindling in her mind grew stronger. “But I have an idea.” When Makero and

Thunder frowned quizzically, she eagerly flicked her tail. “During the war, animals are going to get hurt. I think we should gather some animals that are good at healing—like Maeta—and have them wait on the outskirts of the battlefield to treat injured animals. That way, if an animal is injured, they can run away from the battlefield and go to the healers on the outskirts of the battle. Then they can survive. They might even be able to go back into the battle if they’re treated well enough.”

Makero’s green eyes lit up with excitement. “Saderia, that’s a great idea!”

“I’m not done.” A grin crept across her face. “I’ve been thinking of ways the kraguers could help without actually fighting, and I think I have a good idea. During the battle, the fighters may need to regain their strength or they may need herbs to heal a few minor wounds that aren’t bad enough to go to the healers for. Maybe smaller animals like Jeb—and some volunteers—can go into the fight carrying supplies and give them to animals who need them. I think there’s an herb that can make you feel stronger and less tired. Maybe Jeb could go through the battle giving animals that herb and other supplies to help them.”

Makero’s eyes widened in surprise. “Saderia...you’re a genius!” Smiling proudly and flicking his tail, he glanced hopefully at Jeb. “Would you be willing to do this, Jeb?”

Jeb blinked in surprise, then shrank back nervously. “I...I would have to go into the battle?”

Saderia bit her lip uneasily and nodded, hoping she wasn’t asking too much. “I doubt you would have to fight. You’re small, so you could slip through the fight undetected. We would also advise the fighters to look out for you and the other helpers. All you would have to do would be to run fast if you got in trouble—just fast enough to get away from the fight.”

Jeb narrowed his eyes fearfully and glanced uncomfortably at his paws. He remained silent for a long moment, then slowly took a deep breath and forced himself to look up at Saderia and Makero. Fear haunted his eyes, but he gave them a faint, determined nod. “I...I’ll do it.”

Makero’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Excellent. I’ll speak with your family, and I’ll call a meeting tomorrow to ask for more volunteers. I’ll also gather a few healers to wait on the edge of the battlefield. I’ll ask

Maeta, but she is a valuable fighter and I would prefer to have her skills on the battlefield. Hopefully, she can suggest other healers, though.”

Saderia’s eyes shone eagerly. “That’s great. Thanks, Dad.”

“It was a good idea.” Giving his daughter a proud smile, the King flicked her with his tail, then turned to Thunder and gestured for them to move on. Side by side, the two rulers padded away from them and vanished behind a group of play-fighting dingoes.

Saderia flicked Jeb kindly with her tail, then turned to lead the way back to her friends. The kraguer hastily fell into step behind her, a faint glimmer of pride in his eyes. Together, the two weaved through pairs of fighting, howling animals and looked up eagerly when they caught sight of their friends a few paces away, surrounded on all sides by hordes of growling animals tumbling playfully across the ground. Dash and Dingo sat opposite each other, panting heavily and shooting each other playful glares. A few paces away from them sat Rip and Tear, grumbling under their breath and shuffling through pieces of food to pay up on their bets. At the sound of their approach, Dash and Dingo quickly looked up.

Dash’s eyes gleamed with curiosity. “What happened? Where’d you go?”

“And where’s the water?” Dingo echoed, flattening his ears in disappointment.

Saderia started to speak, then broke off abruptly when a booming roar echoed out around the clearing, making the fighting animals hastily split apart and turn to look for the source with wide eyes. Around the clearing, animals broke apart to gaze at the stage. Slowly, the playful growls died down to a soft, curious silence. Whirling around, Saderia followed the gazes of the animals and stared up at the makeshift stage with curious amber eyes.

Makero stood at the top of the stage, his green eyes gleaming with excitement. Brilliant sunshine dappled his regal fur. With an expression of pride and determination, the King gazed out at his combined forces and smiled eagerly. “The next few hours will be spent training all of you to refine your fighting skills and use your strength. I want everyone to eat well and often throughout the training session to keep your strength up.”

Determination glowed in his eyes. “The day of the battle is fast approaching, and I want you all to be ready. All of you have great potential.

With some work, we'll be ready. And then, together, we will beat Rock and secure the dingoes' freedom once and for all!"

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Leaders

Legions of forest animals and dingoes alike stood facing the stage in strict lines, their expressions stony with determination. A bird soaring over the dark clearing would not see individual animals, but a whole—an army—all waiting for instruction. Tense silence reigned in the clearing. In the distance, the sun slunk closer to the horizon, casting milky pink and yellow light out over the forest. The dying light seemed to shimmer in the eyes of every animal facing the stage. Every eye seemed to blink at once and every breath seemed to be taken in perfect synchrony. It was as if the rows of animals in the clearing were no longer individual animals, but a part of a great, strong creature prepared to fight.

Nobody spoke or whispered to each other. Icy wind whistled through the shadowy trees and rustled the leaves and the fur of the animals, but not a single one moved or even twitched. Each of them stood firm, waiting for orders. From where she stood atop the stage, Saderia could gaze down at the rows of animals and make out familiar faces.

The leopard leader Maeta stood firmly in the second row of forest animals on the left side of the clearing, her gaze as unwavering as her determination. A few rows behind her stood a strong cheetah that she recognized as Loki's father. Jeb and his family sat at the back of the clearing with their backs to the shadowy woods. Several other animals sat beside him in a neat row—the other 'runners,' the animals responsible for bringing supplies into the battle. Most of the runners were forest animals with only a few dingoes in between. Though they didn't sit with the other runners, Cia and Uncle Jash would join them when the battle began. The two tigers had already determined they would be of better use outside of combat.

Directly behind the runners was another row consisting entirely of forest animals—healers, the ones who would sit on the outskirts of the battle and care for any animal who staggered away from the fight—be it

dingo or forest animal. Only forest animals qualified to be healers simply because dingoes had no knowledge of medical practices. Their idea of a bandage was a thick layer of sand. Out of all the healers, only one face was familiar to Saderia: Lisa's. When Makero had approached Maeta days ago to ask whether she would act as a fighter or healer, Maeta had chosen to fight, but she had suggested other competent healers. One of them had been the young leopard, who Maeta had been training to become a healer. In the eyes of every healer was an unwavering glow of determination.

Dingo sat in the front row of outcasts on the right side of the clearing, steadily facing the stage. His two brothers, Rip and Tear, sat in the row behind him. Not even the two pranksters were making trouble. All of them stood rigidly still, watching the stage.

War loomed on the horizon. All of the animals before her would be going to battle the very next day, and she would be leading them. Already, their formation was planned out. A few days ago, the forest King and the outcast Leader had figured out the best way to arrange the army. Every animal had been given a specific place in formation. Fighters would march ahead, with healers and runners behind them. Only the toughest fighters would be placed in the front, while animals with decent abilities would be interspersed throughout the middle rows. Not a single dingo *hadn't* looked shocked when Dingo had been given a spot in the very first row, signifying he was one of the toughest fighters.

The dingoes would stay on the right and the forest animals would remain on the left with a few intermingled in the middle. Having the two groups of animals separated simply made it easier for the two rulers to command their armies. Makero would command the forest animals on the left, while Thunder would command the right. Once the battle began, everyone would break formation to help anyone on either side.

Saderia's gaze flicked to the outcasts' feet. A red ribbon was tied around every canine's left paw—a symbol meant to distinguish Thunder's dingoes from Rock's. Distinctive enough that her fighters would recognize the wearers as comrades but discreet enough not to draw the attention of Rock's pack members, the ribbons seemed perfect.

Saderia's eyes glowed in the dying light of the sun. This was it. Finally, after a week of rough training, the dingoes and forest animals were ready to fight. Finally, they were one.

Just the way Dastarius had planned. The thought flitted through Dash's mind as he gazed down at the rows of animals before him. Every body was poised in firm lines. All paws touched the ground in the same position. The tilt of their heads all angled the same way. The glint in their eyes matched that of their neighbor. Every animal in the vast army stood tensely before him, waiting for orders from him, Saderia, Makero, and Thunder—their leaders.

Dash's eyes glinted in the faint light. Just a few nights ago, Dastarius had told him that it would turn out like this—that the animals would look to them for orders, that their loyalty to the cause would triumph over everything else. Hope flickered in the dark lion's eyes as he gazed out at the tense clearing. If Dastarius was right, the war would be won and the trouble it brought would soon be over. Still...he couldn't hate the war entirely. After all, it had brought the dingoes and forest animals together and made them loyal.

Dash's eyes flicked to Makero's face when the King stepped up to the edge of the stage beside him to speak. A hint of annoyance burned in his chest. Why should Makero get to be the one who got to command their forces when he and Saderia were the ones who had come up with all the ideas? They were the ones who had started the war in the first place. Rolling his eyes internally, Dash simply sat back on the wooden stage to let Makero speak. He supposed it was simply more fitting for the King to address the forest.

Makero's green eyes sparkled in the darkness and his voice echoed out over the silent clearing. "You have all made amazing progress. Each and every one of you gathered here before me will be of excellent use in the battle. Together, we will win!"

Pride glimmered in the eyes of the dingoes and the forest animals. A few of them shared a brief, eager glance before returning their eyes to the King.

Makero calmly faced the crowd, his eyes gleaming with determination. "We shall strike at the break of dawn tomorrow. At five o'clock sharp, we will meet here for a brief meeting. We, your leaders, will speak and tell you the plan for the battle to make sure each of you knows what to do. After that, you will get in formation and Leader Thunder and I will divide you into two groups—one that will strike Rock's camp from

behind and one that will attack from the front. Tomorrow, we will discuss battle tactics in depth. Right now, the important thing for you to do is return to your homes and rest. Spend time with your families and get some sleep. You all need to be ready for battle tomorrow.”

A few animals exchanged nervous glances, but none said a word. The clearing remained tensely, respectfully silent. Slowly, every forest animal returned their gaze to the King. Anxiety disappeared in an unwavering current of raw, hard determination.

Saderia took a deep breath and inched closer to Dash as she gazed out at the forest animals. Her father’s words echoed in her mind, nearly making her wince. She knew why he wanted everyone to spend time with their families tonight. After tonight, their families may never see them again. For some of the fighters, this could very well be their last night alive.

A wave of guilt crashed over her and she squeezed her eyes shut to hide her regret. In the back of her mind, she knew there was no other way. The war *had* to be fought. After so much bloodshed in the desert, it was high time the dingoes stopped living in fear. Not to mention, as soon as the war was over, finding her mother would be a lot easier. Her amber eyes opened and flashed in determination. Her heart hardened. The war had to happen. For freedom. For the dingoes and the forest animals. For her mother.

Looking out at the animals gazing up at her with eyes full of hope and determination, the thought that some of them might not return sent a shudder of pain racing through her, but there was nothing she could do about it. What was she supposed to do? Step forward and say, “Never mind, there isn’t going to be a war. Sorry, outcasts. Go home now.” No, she had built up the forest animals’ and the outcasts’ hopes and she couldn’t crush them now. Every animal had spent too much time preparing for the battle to back out now. All she could do now was be strong for her kingdom and lead them to victory.

Out of the corner of her eye, Saderia glanced at Dash and felt her hopes rise. Passion and determination glittered in his amber eyes, and he stared out at the army gathered before him with pride, as if it was his own personal protégé. Not a hint of fear or unease haunted his stern face. The dark lion seemed to hold no worry for the future at all. Catching her eye, he gave her a faint, reassuring smile and tapped her lightly with his tail.

Weakly, she returned the smile, then gazed back at the crowd. Dash followed her gaze coolly, his stony expression hiding his thoughts. Some of the animals before him might be marching to their deaths, but he ignored a twinge of guilt. All of them knew what they were doing. They knew they were fighting for a cause. To die for it was only natural.

Dash's eyes shone knowingly. Every day from sundown to sunup, Dastarius had visited him. The dark lion had spent plenty of time advising him on the current state of affairs, but the rest of their time had been spent practicing fighting. The first two nights had been filled with nothing but practice. When Dash awoke both mornings, his entire body had felt exhausted from the constant fighting. After several nights of 'staying up' practicing with Dastarius, though, he had gotten used to it. Exhaustion had ceased to affect him and he could easily focus now. Actually, he felt more rejuvenated after a night of fighting. More than anything, he felt eager to put into action the plans Dastarius had given him.

His father truly was the best teacher for the coming war. After all, he had managed to save him from six dingoes. Throughout the past week, the dark lion had slowly offered him bits and pieces of his grand master plan, though he had yet to reveal his plan entirely.

Throughout the past week, his father had told him exactly how he should train the fighters. For the most part, training them *had* been Dash's job. When the training sessions first began, Makero had been the one to coach the fighters, but by the third day, he had run out of ideas. While the King struggled to find new ways to train the animals, Dash had felt the urge to step in. When the fighters had gathered in the meeting place on the fourth day, Dash had been the one to address them. As soon as he started speaking, the words just spilled out of him. Before, he had worried about not being able to find the right words, but the second he stood before the legions of animals, they seemed to come to him so easily. Keeping Dastarius's previous lessons in mind, he had spoken to the crowd and led them through some of his father's old fighting lessons with a strong, confident air of determination.

From that day on, the duty of training the fighters had been his. Makero had let him teach the budding army while he, Saderia, and Thunder had wandered around, helping individuals who were having trouble. At the head of the clearing, Dash had stood atop the stage, teaching the fighters

new moves his father had taught him the night before. When their fighting moves seemed flawless, Dash had taught them all to remain calm and still while waiting for instructions. It had been his idea to place all the animals in formation with the strongest at the front. He had been the one who had taught them the obedience they now showed to their leaders. It had been him who had taught them to hold their heads high and remain calm even in the face of danger. He alone had taught them to dedicate their thoughts only to the war. Their preparation at the end of the week was due to him.

As the days passed by, Dash had found it easier to lead the fighters. The confidence he radiated to the crowd seemed to come not from a façade, but his own self-assurance. The thought of the war looming on the horizon or the casualties it might bring no longer scared him. The war was necessary—something that should have happened a long time ago. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing to fear. Either they won, or they didn't. It was highly unlikely they would lose. If they did, though, all they would have to do would be to regroup, get more recruits, train them, and attack again. They would easily be able to correct their previous mistakes. Plus, Dash was sure Dastarius would have a back-up plan if they lost...

A satisfied sneer crept across his face. There was nothing to fear. He practically held victory in his paws. After all, Dastarius had assured him that no matter what, he would come out victorious. All he wanted to do now was leave the meeting and sleep, so he could hear the final details of his father's master plan. Tomorrow, he would put that plan into action. Smirking, he gazed at Makero and waited for the meeting to end.

Makero's eyes glowed in the faint light, his green irises shadowed with grimness but gleaming with determination, a mirror of the conflict in his heart. Narrowing his eyes, he faced the army before him and spoke, his voice ringing out over the clearing. "Before I dismiss all of you, I will allow Leader Thunder to say a few words to his dingoes."

Glancing at the shadowed back of the stage where Thunder sat, Makero dipped his head and stepped away from the edge of the stage to give him space. Saderia's eyes flicked to the outcast Leader near the back of the stage and her heart burned with sympathy for the clearly frazzled dingo. Dark bags hung under Thunder's eyes, as if he hadn't slept in days, and his yellow brown fur stuck out in ragged clumps. A hollow, helpless look haunted his face. Slowly, he rose up on shaky legs and gazed at the crowd

with wide, nervous brown eyes. Clumsily, he stumbled forward to take Makero's place. His legs shook when he stood before the huge crowd of outcasts and his eyes shone with unease.

Sympathy glowed in Saderia's eyes. Thunder seemed painfully overwhelmed by the task of leading the dingoes into battle. As far as she knew, Thunder had been more or less forced into the role of Leader. It wasn't something he had chosen...or even really wanted. The thought of being responsible for hundreds of lives in a job he hadn't signed up for probably weighed heavily on his shoulders. Still, in the back of her mind, Saderia wished he could be stronger and hide his fear better. The outcasts didn't need a shaky, uncertain Leader. They needed a strong, confident one to guide them through this mess.

Dash's eyes narrowed and a shadow crossed his face as he watched Thunder stand shakily on the stage. Thunder wasn't cut out to be a Leader. He gave away his emotions too easily. Every animal in the clearing could tell he had no idea what he was doing. That wasn't good. Leaders should be strong and capable, not shaky and weak. Dash's eyes flashed and anxiety crept down his spine. Thunder didn't seem like he would ever be able to lead the dingoes. Could he actually lead them into battle and command them to victory? Even if he could, would he be the one to rule the desert after the outcasts won it back? Clearly, he wasn't cut out for the job. The dingoes needed someone stronger and more secure. Like... well, like him. Unfortunately, he wasn't a dingo, so he couldn't exactly be their Leader...

The thought flitted through his mind and his eyes glowed with curiosity. What would it be like to be a Leader or a King? Dingoes always chose their Leaders young. Thunder himself was twelve, Rock was the same age, and Dingo's evil brother, Bone, had been eleven when he had become Second in Command. Dash was only two years younger than Thunder. If he had been a dingo in the pack, they might have made him Leader.

His thoughts whirled with curiosity. What would it be like to rule a whole nation? The pressure would probably be enormous...but not if he knew what he was doing. An eerie glow crept into his eyes as the sun sank below the horizon. Having that much power might be fun. It might be nice to be able to decide what was right and what was wrong—especially when no one would question it. If he led a nation—whether desert or forest—he

would have no problem guiding his army in a fight for freedom. After all, it was the right thing to do. Why Thunder seemed to have a problem with it, he couldn't understand.

Thunder took a deep, faltering breath and shakily faced the crowd of outcasts. He opened his mouth to speak, then balked and glanced nervously at his paws, seeming to shrink away from the eyes of the dingoes. Flicking his tail anxiously, he stared at his paws and muttered something Saderia and Dash could just barely hear. "I...I think King Makero covered the basics... We'll talk battle tactics in the morning. In the meantime...spend time with your friends or practice battle moves...Tomorrow, we'll attack. We'll... we'll beat Rock." The Leader tried to smile optimistically, but his grin looked more like a grimace.

The outcasts exchanged uneasy glances, but merely nodded to their awkward Leader, their eyes still shining with determination. Shakily, Thunder stumbled away from the edge of the stage and shrank down at the very back, as if to hide. With a confident sweep of his tail, Makero took Thunder's place and gazed out at the crowds with shining eyes.

"You are dismissed," the King announced. "Spend your time wisely tonight and return here early tomorrow morning. And may the battle go in our favor."

At once, the forest animals and dingoes broke out of formation and spread out in the clearing. Several forest animals lingered to speak to friends, while others slunk toward the shadowy woods to return home. Their eyes glowed with determination.

Happiness rose in Saderia's chest when she saw nearly all the forest animals stop to speak to some of the dingoes before they left. Nearly every animal paused to speak to friends they had made during training. Her eyes glowed with hope when she saw crowds of dingoes and forest animals gathering together to spend a few moments together. At the same time, her heart twisted at the thought of the war. How many of these friends would never see each other again?

"You've done very well, my son." Dastarius paced smoothly around the cold, dream-like clearing, circling Dash and flicking his black-tufted tail lightly over the stiff grass. An unusual shadow of seriousness darkened the

spirit's face and his amber eyes seemed absent as he gazed off into the distance at something Dash couldn't see.

Not bothering to try to keep up with his movements, Dash let out a sigh and sat back on the cool ground. Dastarius would sit down and talk to him like a normal animal soon enough...

"You've done an excellent job training the forest's army." A soft, dreamy tone haunted Dastarius's voice and his eyes seemed distant, as if he was focusing on something other than his words. Absently, he paced around his son. "You've managed to gain the respect of your army. More so than the outcasts' bumbling Leader, at least."

Dash glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "You've noticed it, too?"

"That Thunder's Leadership is a mistake? That he's not doing his job?" Dastarius flicked his tail lightly as he stalked past Dash, his eyes glowing in the dim light. "Of course. He has good intentions, but he doesn't have the skills to enforce his lofty goals."

Dash nodded absently. "Right. The dingoes need someone strong to lead them."

Dastarius raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

Dash shrugged lightly. "Such as me, I guess. But it's not like I can be a dingo Leader." He rolled his eyes at the ridiculousness of the idea.

Dastarius slowly paced back around and paused when he stood in front of him. Smoothly, he sat back on the frosty grass and curled his black-tufted tail neatly over his paws. "Don't sell yourself short. Would you *want* to be a Leader?"

Dash blinked in surprise, then carelessly flicked his tail. "Sure. But it's not like that'll happen. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm not a dingo."

"Hmm...True." Dastarius gazed absently into the shadowy woods, his tail twitching lightly. "Nonetheless, from what I've seen, it's not too difficult to take over in the dingoes' society. As long as you possess the right skills, it shouldn't be too hard to take control of those mutts. Even if you are—as they so graciously call you—'forest food.'"

A grin twitched at the corners of Dash's mouth, but a flicker of confusion and curiosity lit up his amber eyes. Narrowing his eyes in a more serious, wondering expression, he tipped his head to the side and frowned. "Why does it matter?"

Dastarius blinked several times, as if waking up from a deep sleep. Narrowing his eyes, he met Dash's gaze and calmly flicked his tail. "It doesn't matter. Let's forget about it." Rising to his paws, he padded across the grass to resume pacing, ignoring the gleam of annoyance in Dash's eyes. "I take it you want me to tell you more about the battle."

Dash's tail twitched with irritation. "That would be nice."

Dastarius simply chuckled and circled him without saying a word. Only after looping around him twice did he finally stop and sit down in front of him. Even when he sat, he didn't say a word. For the longest time, he merely stared at Dash with glowing amber eyes that bored right into him. Dash's fur bristled in annoyance, but he never averted his gaze. Instead, he met Dastarius's eyes calmly, letting a challenging glint creep into his amber irises.

After what seemed like an eternity, a gleam of resolution crept into Dastarius's amber eyes, as if he had come to some huge decision. A sneer crept across his face. At last, he broke the tense, trance-like silence between them. "You've done well training your troops for the fight. Everyone knows they can trust you and that you're a good leader. But at the same time, it's Princess and her father who are getting all the recognition. You're still not considered one of the 'real' leaders. In their eyes, you're just sort of... there."

Dash's eyes narrowed and he lashed his tail in frustration. "Well, what else can I do to get them to notice me?" Why this was so important, he didn't know, but the way Dastarius talked about it made it seem like it was a matter of deathly importance.

A smirk crept across Dastarius's face. "Don't worry about it too much. In the coming days, you'll have plenty of time to shine."

Dash frowned in bewilderment. "What do you mean? The battle's tomorrow. After the battle, everything will go back to normal. No more chance for me to 'shine.'"

"Don't be so sure." A mysterious gleam twinkled in Dastarius's eyes. "It's not a guarantee that you'll win this fight. And even if you do manage to get the upper hand, you may still have to retreat to avoid heavy casualties. If Rock lives long enough to command his pack to hurt your fighters, you may be forced to retreat, or risk losing everything. If that turns out to be the case, you'll have to fight another battle and maybe even

another. This could turn out to be a whole series of battles rather than just one major fight.”

Dash’s eyes widened in horror. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. I don’t speak for my health,” Dastarius snapped, shooting him a disdainful glare and lashing his tail. Turning away, he gazed around at the shadowy woods and let out a quiet sigh, his amber eyes lighting up with an eerie, otherworldly glow. “You don’t need to fret, though, son. Whether you win this battle or not doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t lose too many of your fighters, you will be able to recover. There will be other chances for you to kill Rock and triumph.”

Dash shuffled his paws uneasily. “Well...I guess. Still. I would prefer to just win and get this whole thing over with...”

“I’m aware of that.” A knowing gleam lit up his eerie eyes. “But things don’t always go the way we want.” He paused, then glanced at him more mildly. “Nonetheless, you should do your best to win the fight the first time. You know what your job is, right?”

“To kill Rock,” Dash growled, his eyes flashing and his gaze hardening with determination. “Thunder said he would do it, but I don’t know if he really could or not. He can barely even stand to make a speech to his pack...”

“And you could?” Dastarius raised an eyebrow, as if he already knew the answer.

Dash’s fur bristled in annoyance. “Of course I could. I’m not a wimp.”

“I see.” A grin twitched at his mouth. “Anyway, that’s all you need to know for now. All you have to do is fight Rock’s forces, protect those on your side, and take down the Leader. As soon as you’ve accomplished all that, you’ll have freed the oppressed, united the dingoes and forest animals, and created a new world for dingo-kind.”

Dash raised an eyebrow and tried not to roll his eyes. “You make it sound so easy.”

Dastarius shrugged. “It might not be easy, but essentially, that’s what you have to do. As soon as you’ve defeated Rock, you will have saved the dingoes. And as soon as the evil dingoes are defeated, you’ll have a better chance of finding your missing Queen.”

Dash's ears pricked up with hope. "Really? This war will help us find Karenisha?"

Dastarius nodded and let a grin creep across his face. "Yes. Soon, it will all make sense to you."

"Good." Dash grinned eagerly, then paused and felt his smile falter. Unease crept into his eyes. "So...if we do lose this battle...you do have a back-up plan...right?"

Giving a nonchalant flick of his tail, Dastarius nodded absently. "Of course. However Rock chooses to play out his little plan upon defeating you, I'll tell you what to do and how to fix it. To a degree, I can already tell what he'll do if he does win...which is why it might even be best to let him win the first round..." Dastarius's eyes glowed thoughtfully in the shadows, but he merely flicked his tail when Dash stared at him in bewilderment. "You don't need to worry about any of that yet, son. Keep your eyes on the prize and worry about losing when it happens. When it does happen—if it happens—you'll be ready. You'll be able to lead the forest animals through one of the greatest plans they've ever seen. Then no one will ever overlook you again. You'll be a hero, Dash."

Dastarius's amber eyes glittered in the darkness. "You'll be a leader."

Screams erupted through the darkness, ringing horribly in the air. Deafening howls rang out from every direction, piercing the air and echoing over and over again in Saderia's burning ears. Low snarls, furious hisses, and dangerous growls rumbled in the distance, seeming to shake the very earth. The shrieks rang in her ears over and over again until she couldn't tell whether they came from around her or from her own mind.

Saderia's eyes flew open and a gasp of horror tore out of her mouth. Shadowy figures whirled past her in a blur of dark fur and vibrant scarlet liquid. Bodies rushed past her, letting out howls that burned her ears. Figures tumbled across the gritty brown ground, slamming onto the earth and letting out shrieks of pain. No matter where she turned, all she could see were hundreds of shadowy animals lunging at each other and tackling each other to the ground. Their vicious howls and deafening screams made her blood run cold.

Blood splattered the sand and stained the shadowy figures around her. Vibrant red on blurry shadows leered at her from every direction. The salty scent of gore rose in the air, sending shivers of disgust racing through her. She could practically taste it in her own mouth. The entire earth seemed to shake around her as bodies collapsed to the ground. Flickers of the faces of the shadow figures caught her eye as she swung around, searching desperately for an escape. Forest animals lunged toward their enemies or collapsed to the ground. Dingoes fought viciously with their own kind. Malice glowed in the eyes of some of the blurry dogs. Others carried an aura of determination. Everywhere there was blood.

Her heart pounded so wildly, she could barely feel it. Her entire body burned with pain and her legs shook as she struggled to even stand. Gasping in fear, she gazed around desperately for an escape before sharply looking up. A gasp tore out of her throat and she froze in horror when she saw what loomed above her. A huge rock wreathed in shadows towered in the dark sky, overlooking the vicious battle. Brutal, stony spikes rose up and surrounded a long platform that hung over the fight. On the very edge of the terrifying platform stood two figures, gazing at the carnage and letting out cruel laughs. Behind them glimmered a faint figure shrouded in shadows. His eerie laugh seemed the loudest.

Two amber eyes flashed at the top of the rock, making her heart freeze. A cold, triumphant laugh split the air just as a malevolent voice growled in her ear. "Kill her."

A gasp of horror tore out of Saderia's throat and she jolted up in her bed, her eyes flying open in alarm. Thick darkness greeted her the instant her eyes flew open, making her heart skip a beat. A shaky breath escaped her mouth and her trembling paws frantically clutched the blanket lying messily around her, as if it were the only thing shielding her from the blackness. Through the thick glass of the window, a faint glimmer of silver light shone into her room and illuminated the sweaty, messy orange fur on her face.

Her sides heaved with pants and her eyes stared emptily into the darkness, hollow with anxiety. Horrible pain burned in her chest. She could feel the pain in the tear trembling on the edge of her eye. She could feel it bubbling in her chest like a concoction boiling in a cauldron. She could feel

it tingling in her paws as her claws tore through the thin blue blanket into her paw pads. Her entire body tensed with agonizing fear. The war was nigh.

The Dream glimmered in the very back of her mind, haunting her with its eerie memory. Slowly, the terror wrapping its claws around her heart faded away. Her mind whirled and the entire room seemed to tilt as she struggled to pull herself together. Soon, she would be going to war... Her head spun, but before she could try to clear her muddled thoughts, a creaking sound rose in the air. Letting out a gasp, she whirled around and saw the door creep open through the shadows haunting her room. A dark brown figure stood in the doorway, wreathed in darkness and almost blurry through her clouded, hollow eyes.

Before she knew what was happening, she was stumbling clumsily toward the dark doorway with Dash close beside her. His voice whispered comfortingly in her ear, but she didn't hear a word. In the dim light, she could just barely make out the excited gleam of Dash's amber eyes as he led her out of her room. All she could see through the shadows was a blur of ornate walls and Dash's glowing eyes. His tail rested on her shoulder as if to reassure her, but it felt like a heavy weight pressing down on her.

Her mind whirled. What if Dash died in the battle? The sudden flash of terror that shot through her felt like a drop of poison shot right into her heart. Her entire body shook and her eyes blurred with horror. Intense cold shot through her until her legs felt like ice blocks. Her blood felt like a solid stream of ice shooting through her veins. Just as soon as foreboding swept over her, though, it slipped away. An eerie calm lingered in its place.

A sense of determination burned through the ice. In her heart, she knew that she had to do this, that there was no way out, that she had to carry out her plans. Deep down, she knew she would fight to her last breath for those she loved. Her friend would live. Even if keeping him alive meant her own death, she would never let him die. Never.

A light suddenly shone through the darkness. Not the silvery, natural light of the moon, but a yellow, grimy light shone directly into her eyes. Her eyes instinctively snapped shut and she winced, but the light didn't burn. Instead, the crude light shone through her eyes without burning them, as if she saw straight through it. If it stung, she was too tired to notice. Or her thoughts commanded all of her attention. Through the piercing yellow light,

all she could see were blurs and shadows. Her eyes never seemed to adjust to her surroundings, as if her mind was trapped in the battle she was envisioning.

Mere hours lingered between her and the battle. Mere hours before the screams started, before her claws tore bloody flesh, before she dared to confront the voices in her Dreams that she had been too preoccupied in the past to confront. Just a few hours before her own life teetered over a precipice. If she had the right abilities, the right skills, and the right luck, she could save herself. One wrong move, though, and she was doomed.

A shudder wracked her body. What if she lived, but her friends died? What if they lived, but others died? Casualties of war were expected. All along, she knew that not everyone would return from the battle. But how could she ever cope with the losses after the battle was over? How could she ever recover knowing their deaths were her fault, that she had been the one who had led them into battle? How could she ever cope with the grief-stricken faces of the families of those left behind? How could she ever deal with the cries? How could she deal with the hollow, empty looks in their eyes—the same dead expression that had haunted her face when she had believed Dingo to be dead and the same haunting look that still shadowed Dingo's face whenever he thought of Claw?

Every part of her longed to call it off. The battle had to be stopped. All the pain, all the sadness, all the grief...all of it had to be stopped. Deep down, though, she knew it was too late. All the hard work the forest animals and the outcasts had done to prepare shouldn't have been in vain. All of their effort and determination shouldn't go to waste. They had to fight. Not just because calling it off would be an insult to their hard work, but because they still had something to fight for. Something they believed in. A wrong that had gone too long without being righted. They had to fight for their cause, for the outcasts' freedom, for civility and kindness. Evil tyrants like Rock couldn't get away with terrorizing the world. He had to be stopped. After all, some fates were worse than death.

More than anything, she had to be strong. Her eyes narrowed in determination. Not once did she say a word about her strange Dream. It was too late for Dreams. Instead, she unsheathed her claws and steeled herself for the horrors that awaited her in the battle.

A proud but tired figure crept into the harsh, dirty light. The yellow glow made everything around her seem fuzzy and blocked her father's face with a sharp, hazy gleam. In a faraway voice, the King started explaining everything. With her thoughts lingering on the battlefield and her mind muddled and clouded, she barely understood a word he said. Two more figures crept into the room just as the King finished speaking.

Seconds later, all five of them started moving and Dash pressed against her to urge her to walk with him. Her paws stumbled clumsily across the floor as he led the way. A door creaked open in front of her and a sharp blast of frigid air slammed into her the instant her paws met smooth grass. Shivers raced through her body, but she ignored the harsh cold and tried to enjoy it while it lasted. Soon, everything would be blazing hot.

Darkness surrounded her and shadows flitted across the ground, looming around her like monsters. Her vision seemed to blur with every step, and every second she sank deeper into her dark thoughts of the battle, making the world around her seem hazy and unreal. Everything around her seemed colorless. Shadowed branches reached out toward her as the five of them slunk onto the dirt path, all of them a dark shade of gray. Silver, gray, and black were the only colors around her as moonlight lit up the dark, bleak forest.

The soft ground beneath her felt familiar. Through the darkness and the blurriness, she could barely see the dirt path, but she didn't need to see to find her way through the forest. Her paws moved along the familiar beaten trail and every step seemed to build her strength. This was what she was fighting for, after all. The familiarity of the forest, the peace it gave her—that was what she was fighting for. None of the outcasts knew that kind of serenity. Instead of feeling safe in their home, all any of them could ever feel was fear of being caught and killed at any time. She was fighting to earn that safety for them.

Her eyes flashed. This was *it*. The last few moments before the war. The last few hours before she would have to fight her enemies. Before her sole mission in life became a goal to kill a dingo she didn't even know. Her thoughts were jumbled and everything around her seemed like a blur of darkness and shadows. Even with the threat of war dancing on the horizon, she couldn't make herself feel anything. Not fear, not hope, not worry, not

confidence. All she could feel was a dull numbness as she waited for the inevitable.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, then slowly opened them and cleared the haziness from her gaze. Her forest slowly came into view. With gleaming amber eyes, she gazed at the bushes springing up along the path, the trees swaying in a soft breeze, and the leaves rustling against each other in a soft sound of harmony. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched her father walk grimly beside her, his green eyes narrowed in a grave sense of determination. On her other side, Dash walked close by her, pressing against her and gazing out at the shadows with a dark, eerie excitement in his amber eyes that she had never seen before. Behind her, the paw steps of her aunt and uncle faltered with fear. The creak of the swaying trees around her whispered in her ears and a fresh scent wafted over to her nose.

Her eyes glowed with determination. This was her world. This was what she was fighting for. Raising her head higher, she gazed at the shadowy woods with shining eyes. Her fears slowly faded away and her Dream disappeared from her mind. She had to be strong for the horrors that lay ahead—strong and resilient, like her mother had been. She had to be a leader. Who knew what awaited her in battle? When the war began, she would have to lead her army, watch them fight, see them collapse, maybe even sacrifice herself for the good of others. Her heart hardened and her amber eyes glowed in the dim light.

If that was what it came to, so be it. In the end, she would triumph.

Rows of dingoes and forest animals covered the clearing, facing the long, wooden stage. Saderia stood atop the platform, gazing at the legions of fighters before her. Her father stood to her right, gazing at the army with eyes glowing with determination. On her other side, Dash stared out at the fighters, his amber eyes shining with a strange sense of excitement. Sitting at the back of the stage was Thunder. The outcast Leader shakily looked out at the animals, his eyes hollow and his fur sticking out in messy clumps.

Shadows danced across the faces of the fighters. Only a tiny gleam of moonlight lit up the darkened clearing. The frigid wind rustling through the leaves nipped at their fur and sent shivers through the animals. A thick scent of fear lingered in the air. Anxious whispers rose up from the crowd of fighters, seeming to echo in the tense silence. All the animals stood in

formation, glancing nervously around with fearful eyes and murmuring to their neighbors. Their nervous voices grew louder as they waited for their leaders to speak.

Several other forest animals huddled on the outskirts of the clearing, their faces torn between pride and terror. Many of the animals sat close together for comfort, gazing out at the formation of fighters with worried eyes. Others sat alone. In a crowd of leopards sat Loki, her eyes focused on a cheetah in the middle row of the army. All the friends and families of the fighters lingered on the edges of the clearing, determined to see them off.

Saderia's eyes flicked to each of the animals before her. Her heart hammered wildly in her chest, but she hid any hint of fear in her eyes and kept her head held high. Whenever any animal looked wildly up at the stage and caught her eye, she forced herself to hold their gaze with respect and dignity. Looking away would be an injustice. What the forest animals needed now was a strong leader, and she was determined to be one.

Her eyes scanned the fighters. Dingoes sat on the right and forest animals on the left, all in their rightful places. In the front row on the outcasts' side sat Dingo, his head held high with pride and his light brown eyes blazing with determination. The desert dog faced the stage with a calm, stony gaze, curling his tail neatly over his paws. Saderia's heart ached. Dingo would never take something like this lightly. Even now, he remained calm and determined to fight for his friends—even if it meant a fight to the death. The fact that he stood in the front row meant he would be the first to be struck. A shiver of fear raced down her spine and she forced herself to look away, hoping desperately that he would survive.

Gazing out at the rest of the clearing, she spotted Jeb sitting in one of the back rows with the other runners. Terror gleamed in his blue/green eyes and his paws shook, but he sat rigidly in place, refusing to back down. Fear shot through Saderia at the sight of the tiny creature. With no fighting skills, the kraguer would have to run in and out of the fight and make it out without being attacked. With every last bit of hope she had, she hoped he wouldn't get hurt and that the fighters would look out for him.

The fearful whispers of the fighters grew louder every second. Panic crept into their eyes and a wave of fear seemed to wash over the clearing as the prospect of war loomed closer. Soon, shouts and wails of fear rang out from the crowd of animals. Terror glowed in their eyes and their voices rose

in intensity as they struggled to be heard. Cries and shouts echoed out all around the clearing, growing louder and louder each second.

Makero narrowed his eyes and stepped up to the edge of the stage, his green irises flashing. “Quiet!” he roared, struggling to make his voice heard over the shouts. No one seemed to hear him. The fighters’ fearful voices only grew louder as the anxious animals glanced wildly at their neighbors. Not a single one quieted. Only a few remained calm.

“Quiet!” Makero shouted as loud as he could, but to no avail. The nervous shouts and cries boomed out around the clearing louder than ever.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and started to step toward the edge of the stage, but a movement beside her made her pause. In an instant, Dash rose to his paws and stalked to the edge of the stage before her. Without hesitating, he threw back his head and let out a booming roar that echoed out over the anxious voices, a roar she had never heard before.

Instantly, the noise faded and every animal whipped around to face the stage in surprise. In a few short minutes, the whispers died away and a stunned silence fell over the clearing. Dash faced the forest animals with a calm, unflinching gaze, then simply backed away and sat back down beside Saderia, his amber eyes cool and determined.

Makero’s green eyes glittered with surprise, but he shot Dash a grateful smile before stepping up to take his place on the edge of the stage. Pride glowed in his eyes as he gazed out at the leagues of animals before him. Every forest animal stared back at their King with wide, fearful eyes, desperately searching for reassurance. On the other side of the clearing, the dingoes quietly started to whisper to themselves, their voices soft but anxious. The King ignored them and let them whisper. After all, he wasn’t their Leader.

Saderia’s eyes flicked to the back of the stage where Thunder sat staring at the crowd with hollow, shell-shocked brown eyes. Part of her felt surprised that he hadn’t done anything to calm the outcasts so they wouldn’t talk during Makero’s speech. When she saw the distant, fearful look in his eyes, though, she could tell the outcast Leader himself was more terrified than any of his fighters. Visions of the battle seemed to dance before his eyes and he didn’t seem to notice anything else. His eyes stared hollowly into the distance. The Leader probably didn’t have the strength to worry

about his outcasts talking when he was trying to figure out how he could possibly lead them into battle.

Tearing her eyes off of Thunder, Saderia turned back to face the forest animals, trying not to feel sorry for him. Just as she turned, Makero raised his voice to speak in a tone ringing with determination. “The day of the battle has come.” The King’s strong voice echoed out over the clearing, making every eye turn to him. “The day we finally get to test our skills, the day we get to show our loyalty to the cause, the day we fight for what is right. If we win today, we will have proved that good can triumph over evil. We will have freed the dingoes from their oppressive state and won a new, peaceful ally for ourselves.”

His strong words sent a wave of calm out over the clearing. All of the forest animals slowly started to relax as they listened to his speech. Determination shone in their eyes as their fears vanished and their will to fight began to return.

With a proud smile, Makero calmly flicked his tail. “Now onto our strategy. You will be split into two groups—one that will attack Rock’s camp from behind and one that will attack from the front. In just a few moments, I will divide you up into those groups.”

Saderia’s eyes shone with determination. Rising to her paws, she stepped up beside her father and spoke up in a strong voice. “Each group will have both forest animals and dingoes.”

“Group One will have the most dingoes because it will have to circle Rock’s camp in order to attack from behind.” Dash held his head high and stalked to the edge of the stage to stand proudly beside Saderia and Makero, his amber eyes flashing. “Group One will have to do the most traveling in order to position themselves in the right place around Rock’s camp. Since dingoes know the desert inside and out, they will guide the few forest animals in that group through the desert. Leader Thunder will lead Group One.”

Makero gave Dash a determined nod, then gazed out at the crowd with shining eyes. “I will lead Group Two. Group Two will consist mostly of forest animals, including Saderia, Dash, and myself. There will be a few dingoes who will help us guide the group through the desert. Group Two will strike immediately after Group One strikes.”

“When Group One strikes the camp from behind, the dingoes in Rock’s camp will be taken by surprise,” Saderia added, her eyes glowing in the shadows. “Rock and his followers will immediately try to fight them off. But then Group Two will swoop in and attack from the front, which will take them by surprise *again*. That will give us an advantage.”

“Exactly.” Makero’s tail flicked eagerly back and forth. “It should take Group One a longer time to get in place, so Group Two will have to wait before they strike. They should wait approximately...” The King trailed off and frowned, trying to calculate exactly how long they should wait. Since he didn’t know desert navigation, the answer eluded him. Worry colored his eyes as he struggled to figure out what he should tell them.

Saderia’s eyes flicked back toward Thunder. This was his cue to step in and provide the King with vital information. As a dingo, the outcasts’ Leader, and Rock’s former Second in Command, he should know how long it would take the group to circle around to the back of Rock’s camp. The outcast Leader didn’t speak, though. At the back of the stage, Thunder stood rigidly still, his dark brown eyes wide and unfocused. Too caught up in his fearful thoughts, he didn’t seem to have heard a word the King had said.

“One hour.” Surprise glimmered in Saderia’s eyes and she instantly turned to face the crowd of outcasts at the sound of the sudden, calm voice. Dingo stared up at the stage calmly, facing the King with knowing light brown eyes. “Group Two should wait one hour to allow Group One to get in place. If Group One doesn’t attack within an hour, there’s a problem.” Dingo’s gaze remained cool even as other dingoes shot him curious glances.

Makero dipped his head gratefully. “Thank you, Dingo. Right, then. One hour.” He gazed back at the forest animals with shining green eyes. “You heard him. Group Two will wait one hour for Group One to strike and then rush in. With all of our strength combined, we will fight like heroes and earn ourselves a victory. Be strong and fight bravely. We will leave soon.”

Leveling his gaze with his forest animals, the King rested his tail on Saderia’s shoulder, then stepped back, leading her and Dash along with him. All of the forest animals faced the royal family with calm, determined eyes and steady gazes. No one said a word.

On the right side of the clearing, the dingoes' voices rose louder with fear. Panic gleamed in their eyes and they shifted restlessly in place. Several cries of fear rang out as each dingo turned to face their neighbor, seeking guidance with eyes wide with terror. Every dingo seemed to sink deeper and deeper into panic as the seconds dragged by and their alarm seemed to grow stronger when their Leader didn't step forward to offer them any words of advice. Their fearful cries and whispers echoed around the still clearing.

Saderia's eyes flicked to the back of the stage and her heart sank. Thunder still sat rigidly still. The Leader hadn't made one move toward the edge of the stage. Pure terror glowed in his dark brown eyes and his fur bristled with fear. His eyes locked on the crowd of fearful dingoes and glowed with dismay, but he didn't seem to know what to do.

Unease gleamed in Saderia's amber irises. Leaning back, she caught Thunder's gaze and let out a quiet hiss to catch his attention. "Thunder!"

Thunder nearly jumped and instantly whipped around to look at her with eyes wide with alarm. From his pale, hollow face and the fear in his eyes, he looked as if he was staring into the very eye of a hurricane. With a discreet flick of her tail, Saderia gestured toward the front of the stage. A faint light of understanding flickered into Thunder's eyes, but an overwhelming wave of fear seemed to swallow it up instantly.

On unsteady paws, Thunder rose shakily to his feet and stumbled clumsily toward the front of the stage, seeming to dread every step. Every dingo instantly turned to look at him with frightened eyes the second he stumbled to the edge of the stage, freezing him in place. Their voices grew louder and more terrified every second. Frozen on the edge of the stage, Thunder gazed out at his outcast pack with wide, terrified brown eyes. His mouth opened to speak, but no words came out. A harsh, choking sound escaped his mouth and he froze, his eyes wide with horror and his paws rigid with fear. As if petrified, he stood rigidly still on the edge of the stage, unable to speak or move.

The terror written in the eyes of the outcast Leader only sent another wave of fear washing over his outcasts. Panic and helplessness glowed in their eyes at their Leader's silence. Howls of alarm burst out from the crowd and every dingo shifted in place, gazing wildly around for any explanation as to what was going on with eyes wide with confusion. Even

the forest animals shifted nervously at the sight of the dingoes' panic and their Leader's eerie silence. Only one dingo near the front of the formation remained calm.

Saderia's heart sank at the sight of the chaos. It seemed as if someone had poured wax over Thunder. His tail was frozen in midair and the frazzled Leader didn't seem capable of moving or speaking. Taking a deep breath, Saderia rose to her paws and started to move toward him, then froze when a movement from the crowd caught her eye.

At the front of the crowd of outcasts, Dingo calmly rose to his paws and stepped away from the formation, his light brown eyes cool. Not a hint of distress clouded his light irises. Only resignation shone on his scarred face. Carefully, he padded away from the outcasts, his paws moving faster with every step. Determination lit up his light brown eyes and his ears flattened. Breaking into a run, he bounded toward the stage and leapt up onto the wooden platform. Without hesitating, he marched to the edge of the stage, stepped past Thunder, and gazed out at the outcasts with dark, glowing eyes. With a calm, determined face, he took a deep breath, then threw back his head and let out a long, deafening howl.

Dingo's booming howl echoed throughout the entire clearing. Slowly, the cries of the outcasts died away as it rang in their ears. One by one, the dingoes quieted and gazed up at the stage with wide, stunned eyes. In seconds, every canine fell silent and stared up at Dingo, never blinking or looking away. Thick silence fell over the clearing.

When every voice died away, Dingo lowered his head and faced the outcasts with calm but blazing brown eyes. The canine watched them coolly for a long, tense moment, then raised his head and spoke out in a proud, powerful voice that rang out as strongly as Makero's. "As King Makero said, tonight is the night. The night we claim our freedom. The night we prove to Rock that we are not weak outcasts meant to be hunted for sport, that we are not his property to be hurt for his amusement. The night we change the desert for good."

Every animal in the clearing stared up at him with wide, curious eyes, barely daring to blink or breathe, as if too afraid of missing something. Dingo faced the outcasts with gleaming light brown eyes, his expression steady but rigid with determination.

“The moment we fight—the moment the battle begins—each of us will prove to Rock that we are *not* afraid of him. Not anymore!” Dingo’s voice echoed through the clearing, ringing with conviction. “We will prove that we are not afraid of him or his twisted laws! We will prove that we are not afraid to avenge the deaths of our friends, to right the wrongs of the pack, and to punish him for the agony he brought to the desert! Today is the day we change what should have been changed a long time ago. The day we prove that the desert doesn’t have to be a place of cruelty, a place where dingoes are scorned for showing a hint of compassion, where one can be exiled for putting one foot out of place, and where so-called Leaders murder to gain their filthy positions!”

A few outcasts exchanged guilty glances. All of them knew Dingo wasn’t just talking about Rock, and all of them had played a part in the misery of Dingo’s past one way or another. Hiding their guilt, every outcast instantly turned back to face him, not wanting to miss a word.

“There’s no reason for anyone to fear Rock. There’s no reason for us to quiver in his presence the way he wants us to. Rock is *not* unbeatable, and he is *not* the scariest thing in the desert. Not on his own.” Dingo’s eyes glittered in the dim light. “Do you know what Rock is? Without all his power, without all his friends, without his cocky attitude? He’s just another dingo, just like you and I. Only he’s scared. Why else would he feel the need to surround himself with the toughest dingoes in the pack? His so-called favorites are not friends, they’re bodyguards. Why else would he be so intent on repressing you, the ones who know the truth about the pack? Why else would he send an entire army to attack a bunch of starved outcasts?” His eyes flashed in the darkness. “Do you know what Rock is? Rock is nothing but a scared little pup with a major superiority complex.”

A few hesitant chuckles rose up from the crowd of outcasts.

Determination glowed in Dingo’s eyes. “The only thing Rock has to use against us is power. That’s all he’s got. His power is the reason he has dingoes on his side that are dense enough to believe he’s right, to think he’s smart enough to hold all the answers. Rock’s power over his pack is intense and his forces are dangerous, but behind that, he is weak. We will use our wits and strength to take him down. If we can take on Rock’s forces strategically, his power will be destroyed and you will have no reason to fear him.”

His eyes gleamed in the faint glow of silver moonlight shining down through the leaves. “Today, our goal is to kill Rock. If we destroy the tyrant holding the pack’s hierarchy together, it will fall just like the rocks of his monstrous den. Remember, though, the fewer casualties, the better. The dingoes Rock controls are just like you. You were all in their place once. You know how easy it is to just look the other way and not take a stand. Just because none of them were brave or smart enough to stand up to Rock doesn’t mean they should be punished. But to Rock, who knowingly and purposely brought death, pain, and destruction into your lives, you should show no mercy.”

Dingo raised his head and gazed out with glowing eyes. “Who’s ready to fight?”

Howls erupted around the clearing the instant the words left his mouth. Every outcast leapt to their paws to shout their support. Their deafening voices echoed through the woods, booming in Saderia’s ears. Purpose glowed in their eyes, shattering their fear. Their enthusiasm seemed to infect the entire clearing. Resolution glowed in the eyes of all the forest animals. The entire clearing seemed to erupt with determination to fight.

A faint smile crept across Dingo’s face as he watched them howl. After a long moment, he held up a paw to silence them. Instantly, every dingo quieted, their eyes eager and hopeful as they awaited orders. Dingo’s eyes gleamed in the dim light and a smile crossed his face. Glancing back at Makero, he dipped his head to the King, then smoothly turned and padded away from the edge of the stage, pressing his tail against Thunder’s side to guide him along with him. Surprise glimmered in Makero’s eyes, but he smiled as he stepped up to take Dingo’s place on the edge of the stage. The fact that Dingo had had the nerve to take Thunder’s place stunned Saderia. Especially considering his history. None of the dingoes had ever listened to him before. All of them had treated him like dirt. Now he was their sole guiding light...

Guiding Thunder with his tail, Dingo sat down near the back of the stage. Signaling for Thunder to do the same, he gazed at the clearing with shining eyes, holding his head high.

At the front of the stage, Makero raised his voice and carefully began to divide the fighters into two groups. Only a few forest animals ended up in Group One, while the rest ended up in Group Two. The King

hesitated when it came time to decide which group the runners and healers would go with. When he paused, Dash smoothly stepped forward and announced that it would be better for them to go with Group Two, since it required less traveling and placed them in a position closer to the forest in case they needed to escape.

Smiling proudly, Makero dipped his head to Dash, then glanced at the back of the stage. With the forest animals sorted, he faced the dingoes behind him and cleared his throat. "I think the outcasts' Leader should divide the dingoes into the two groups." The King wasn't looking at Thunder, though. Instead, his eyes were focused on Dingo.

Dingo cast a glance at Thunder to see if he would step forward. Thunder's eyes widened in alarm at his inquisitive gaze and he instantly shrank back, giving him a pleading look. Clearly, he was content to stay put. Resting his tail gently on Thunder's shoulder, Dingo gave him a slight nod, then calmly stepped up to the edge of the platform to do the Leader's job. With sharp, calculating eyes, he quickly divided the rows of outcasts into two groups. Nearly all the dingoes were assigned to Group One, but a few would travel with the forest animals of Group Two to guide them through the desert. As soon as every outcast had been assigned, Dingo announced that he and Thunder would lead Group One.

With everyone divided into groups, Makero ran through a few quick rules. Most importantly, he explained how some forest animal volunteers would stay in the clearing to watch after the outcasts who couldn't fight. Dingo pups like Bunny and outcasts too old or weak to fight would remain in the clearing where they would be watched by the volunteers. The families of the forest animals were also allowed to wait in the clearing for the fighters to return. Should anything happen to any of the fighters, their families would be well taken care of, as well.

While her father spoke, Saderia glanced at the back of the clearing and let her gaze land on a tiny black pup sitting on the outskirts. Bunny's older brother, Lightning, was probably all she had left. When she spotted the tiny pup, though, she couldn't see a hint of fear or worry on her face. Bunny's eyes were calm and unbothered and her tail flicked lightly back and forth, as if nothing was happening. Didn't she know her brother was going into combat? Shaking the thoughts out of her head, Saderia tore her

gaze off the strange dingo pup. She had more important things to worry about at the moment.

A loud, eager howl jolted Saderia out of her thoughts. In one smooth leap, Dingo leapt down from the stage and raced toward the right outskirts of the clearing, flicking his tail to signal for Group One to follow him. Instantly, all the outcasts in Group One rose to their paws and raced after him to gather on the outskirts of the clearing. The forest animals in Group One hung back with their own kind. Meeting their eyes calmly, Dingo gestured for them to join. Hastily, the forest animals stumbled over to him, hiding their unease. As soon as all of Group One stood around Dingo, Thunder nervously stumbled down from the stage to stand with them. His eyes still seemed clouded with terror and he hung back to let Dingo take the lead.

Dingo lashed his tail and gazed at his group with blazing light brown eyes. "Let's do this! To the battlefield!" Howls and shouts of excitement rang out as soon as the words left his mouth. Smiling faintly, Dingo glanced past the crowd of outcasts and forest animals and met Makero's gaze with calm, burning brown eyes. The desert dog dipped his head to the forest King and held up his tail in farewell. "See you on the battlefield!"

Without another word, he whipped around and bounded into the shadows of the trees, howling for his group to follow. All the outcasts and forest animals thundered after him, streaming past the trees and disappearing into the undergrowth after their leader.

Makero's eyes blazed with determination. In one quick movement, he swung around and roared for his group to gather around him, preparing to leave. The prospect of war loomed even closer on the horizon, drawing closer and closer every second.

Saderia took a deep breath and pressed against Dash as the animals crowded around the stage, waiting for orders. Her best friend pressed back and gave her a weak smile. His amber eyes blazed in the darkness, empty of fear and filled with a burning sense of excitement and determination. Her own eyes glowed fearlessly in the dark, but her heart hammered with terror. A few hours. Just a few more hours and the war would begin...

Her eyes narrowed and her gaze hardened with determination. Now was the time to act, not to fear. After everything she had done to prepare the

forest animals and the outcasts, the time had finally come to free the desert from its oppressive ruler. The war had finally arrived. Now was the time to fight...and she refused to fear it or back down. No matter what, she would fight with every last bit of strength until victory was hers.

Determination blazed in her amber eyes. Gritting her teeth, she let out a booming roar as her army gathered around her. "Today, we fight for freedom! Today, we win!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Battle

Moonlight shimmered down on the barren desert, turning the light brown sand to silver. Tense silence haunted the shadowed, empty land. Not a single sound broke through the quiet darkness of the night. Only the soft, almost unnoticeable breathing of the army behind her whispered in Saderia's ears. Their warm breath tickled her tail and the backs of her legs. Gritty grains of sand scraped against her belly with every step she took.

Crouched down low to the ground, Saderia slunk across the sand with her army behind her. The few dingoes that had been picked for Group Two crept close behind her, while a crowd of forest animals followed in formation. At the very back of the group, the runners and healers slunk along the sand, keeping a few feet away from the army. On either side of her, Dash and Makero slunk across the desert floor, never making a sound.

A current of tension hung over their heads. All around them were miles of empty sand dunes. The shadows of the night hid the army from the sight of any onlookers as they slunk across the ground, but their cover wouldn't last long. Narrowing her eyes, Saderia slunk up to the side of a tall dune and paused, letting the towering hill hide her from sight. Behind her, the fighters paused and watched her carefully, waiting for orders.

Glancing over her shoulder, she put a paw to her mouth to signal for silence, then gazed up at the top of the dune. Her amber eyes glittered with determination. According to the dingoes that had led them across the desert, Rock's camp was just a few feet away. Taking a deep breath, she pressed closer to the ground and silently crept up the slope of the tall, shadowed dune. The fighters slunk after her, not making a sound. Creeping up the dune, Saderia peeked over the top of the hill of sand and gazed out at the land before her. Instantly, a jolt of shock shot through her and her eyes widened. A gasp choked out of her throat.

Rock's camp lay just a few feet in front of her. Hundreds of small dens made out of dusty brown rock were carved into the low sand dunes all

around the flat land. In the center of camp was a small, rocky water trough. Horror gleamed in Saderia's eyes as she gazed out at Rock's enormous camp. At the very back of the camp towered an enormous, terrifying den made of huge, shadowed boulders—the very den that had haunted her Dreams.

The mammoth rock formation towered high in the sky, blotting out the moon that cast an eerie glow around its ragged edges. Dozens of thick boulders piled one on top of the other led up to a long, flat platform that jutted out into the air and looked down on the dark camp. Thick boulders leaned against each other at the back of the platform, forming a rough den with a triangular archway. Rocky spikes jutted out below the platform, acting both as stairs that led up to the long boulder and as a threat. Silver moonlight dappled the brutal spikes.

Saderia's heart sank. Silent gasps sounded around her as her army crept up behind her and saw the den. Rock's towering den...the monstrosity that had haunted her sleep for weeks...now sat just a few feet in front of her. Inside it, Rock would be waiting for them. The brutal Leader wouldn't take part in the fight. Even he wasn't stupid enough to risk his life just for the thrill of fighting when he knew he was the target. No, he would hide and let his minions take care of it for him. That meant the fearsome den was the target.

Dread seeped into Saderia's mind at the sight of the grisly spikes on the den, but she shook it away and gritted her teeth in determination. Killing Rock was the goal. Not only was it her goal, but it was the goal of every animal in her army. Getting to the top of that terrifying rock was their mission. With hundreds of animals in her army, it was only a matter of who got there first and who had the guts to do it. A shiver raced down her spine at the sight of the den's sheer height, but she ignored it. Whoever managed to navigate the fearsome spikes to the top would be the one who won the fight. Someone *had* to do it.

Taking a shaky breath, Saderia gazed down at the sleepy, shadowed camp. A few dingoes crept around the small, rocky dens and pricked their ears, making her tense. None of them seemed to notice anything amiss, though. The few canines in camp growled a few indistinguishable words to their comrades as they moved restlessly about camp. Each of the canines

moved lazily around camp, gazing out at the desert with bored faces. Lookouts, perhaps?

Saderia's eyes narrowed and fiery determination burned in her heart. Unsheathing her claws, she crouched down and remained rigidly still, not daring to move. All her muscles tensed in preparation for the fight. All she had to do now was wait for Dingo's group to attack. The howls and the flurry of activity in camp would be her cue to strike.

Resolution hardened her gaze, but fear still tickled her mind. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at her best friend. Dash crouched beside her, his claws unsheathed and his shoulders tense in preparation to spring. Excitement burned in his amber eyes and his dark brown tail flicked eagerly back and forth. The dark lion seemed to anticipate the fight more than anyone. When she studied him carefully, she felt a jolt of surprise when she noticed the hard muscles in his shoulders. She hadn't thought Dash was that strong... Clearly, he would be able to hold his own, though. After all, he had fought off six of Rock's favorites and lived to tell the tale. The battle wouldn't kill him no matter how horrible it got. Hope shone in her eyes and she tried to keep that thought in her mind.

Discreetly, she glanced back over the heads of the army behind her. Several feet behind her army, she spotted the healers and runners. Her eyes landed on Jeb's vibrant yellow and black-striped form. Fear glowed in the creature's blue/green eyes, but a nervous aura of determination surrounded him. Most of the runners clustered around him, as if to protect him from harm. His mother, Jati, hovered close beside him, her blue and gray eyes glinting in the dim light. More than any of the runners, she looked well-prepared to tear apart anyone who so much as looked at her son. Though she was tiny and had no idea how to fight, Saderia wouldn't have been surprised to see her rip a full-grown dingo to shreds should she feel the need. Between her, the other runners, and the fighters, Jeb would be well-protected. Over the week, he had shown he could run fast, as well. Somehow she had to believe he would be fine.

Her thoughts flitted to Dingo and a tense worry washed over her. Out of the four of them, Dingo was probably the best fighter. Even amongst the dingoes, he was one of the toughest. Just because he was tough enough to protect himself didn't mean he would be safe, though. This fight meant more to Dingo than to anyone else. It was his lifelong dream to save the

pack and change it into a more peaceful place. He wouldn't stop fighting for the outcasts until either Rock died or he did. All of the outcasts seemed to appreciate his fighting spirit, but she doubted they knew just how far he would go to win. In the back of her mind, she hoped Dingo would be all right, but when she couldn't see him to make sure he wouldn't do anything drastic, she couldn't help but worry.

Taking a deep breath, she forced the thoughts away. Whatever happened, she would do everything to protect her friends. All she could do was hope they would be safe...

Violent howls suddenly erupted from the camp, making Saderia's heart stop and her head snap back to the camp in alarm. Dingoes poured into the camp from the opposite side, howling with fury. Around camp, the lookouts looked up sharply and howled in alarm. Panic swept through the pack as Dingo's army thundered into the camp. Instantly, pack members surged out of their dens and raced at the invaders, howling in fury.

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm and she leapt to her paws, her heart racing. "That's our cue!" Whirling around, she faced the army behind her as every animal rose to their paws, their wide eyes shining with exhilaration in the dim light. Gritting her teeth, she lashed her tail and whipped around to lead the way, letting out a cry. "Let's go!"

Dingoes and forest animals poured down the sand dune with her, Dash, and Makero in the lead. Determination blazed in Saderia's eyes. Her heart beat wildly with terror, but she never once slowed down. Her paws viciously pounded the sand. The roar of paw steps behind her echoed in her ears. With every step, the camp grew closer and closer and the screams rising from the camp roared in her ears. On the edge of camp, pack members whipped around and gasped when they spotted them, then raced toward them with wild, furious howls. Saderia gritted her teeth in fury and charged toward the camp as fast as she could.

"*Attack!*" With a furious shout, she lunged into camp. Howls burst out behind her as her army launched into battle right after her. Pack members leapt at them from within the camp. With a thunderous crash of screams and howls, her army collided with Rock's.

Howls split the tense night air. On either side of her, forest animals, outcasts, and pack members clashed in the center of camp and tumbled to the ground, screaming in fury. A dingo flew straight toward her as she

soared into camp. Before she could react, claws met her shoulders and a gasp tore out of her throat. Her back smacked the ground and the breath left her as thick paws slammed down on her shoulders. Cries rang out around her as her army clashed with the pack members and fell to the ground, locked in deadly battles.

Blood seeped out of her shoulders and pain shot through her like a lightning bolt. A gasp of terror escaped her mouth. A burly pack member towered over her, holding her down. Bloodlust gleamed in his eyes and a deadly snarl rumbled in his chest. His mouth curled up in a cruel sneer. "Well, look what we have here," he growled, making her wince at his hot breath. "The forest food are here." A chuckle rumbled in his throat as screams burst out behind him. "You're going to wish you had stayed in your forest, tiger."

With a snarl, he lunged toward her throat, but Saderia let out a cry and instantly yanked her leg away from the dingo's vicious claws. In one swift movement, she raked her claws across his face and kicked out with her hind paws when he jerked away. A cry of pain escaped the dingo's throat and he staggered back, gritting his teeth. Blood dripped down his muzzle. Taking a quick gasp of air, Saderia staggered to her paws, her fur bristling and her shoulders burning with pain. Sticky scarlet liquid streamed down her legs.

Her head snapped up to meet her enemy's eyes and a shiver raced through her. Bloodlust glowed in the dingo's dark irises and a low growl rumbled in his throat. Letting out a furious snarl, he bunched his muscles and lunged toward her. Gritting her teeth, Saderia leapt away just seconds before he hit the ground where she had stood. Landing heavily on the ground, she whipped around to face him as fast as she could and gasped when he loomed up behind her. His paw whipped out and raked the side of her face before she could react. Pain shot through her cheek and she staggered to the side with a cry, her face burning. The pack member's paw soared toward her again, but she ducked just in time to avoid it. Fury gleamed in her eyes.

Flattening her ears, she clawed the dingo's leg. The pack member winced, but didn't back away. Wasting no time, Saderia whipped her claws at his face. In an instant, the dog caught her paw and dug his claws in, tearing a cry out of her throat. Without thinking, she yanked her paw away

and staggered to the side, unbalanced. Triumph glowed in her enemy's eyes. Instantly, he darted toward her, but she caught herself with one paw and clawed his face when he lunged forward to sink his fangs into her flesh.

A yelp escaped the dingo's throat and he staggered clumsily backward, his face streaming with blood. Without hesitating, Saderia lunged after him, letting out a snarl. When he caught himself, she instantly raked her claws across his face. A gasp tore out of the dingo's mouth, but she refused to stop. Using all of her strength, she lashed out again and again, clawing his legs and scoring his muzzle. Growling in fury, the dingo backed away, wincing with every flash of her claws. His eyes squeezed shut, then opened wide, blazing with fury. Before she could react, he ducked to avoid her claws, then slammed his paw into the side of her leg, sweeping both legs out from under her in one swift movement.

Shock blazed in Saderia's eyes and a cry tore out of her throat as she fell to the ground. Her side slammed the ground and her head smacked the earth with a sharp crack. Pain shot through her and her eyes squeezed shut, then opened wide when claws tore into her shoulder and started to push her onto her back. A hiss escaped her throat. In one abrupt movement, she jerked away from the claws, then grabbed the enemy's leg before he could set it back down on the ground. Shock shone in his eyes. Using all of her strength, she dug her claws into his leg and yanked him toward her.

Unbalanced, the pack member staggered toward her. Seconds before he collapsed on top of her, she kicked up and raked her claws across his exposed belly. An agonized howl ripped out of the dingo's throat. Gritting her teeth as blood streaked past her claws, Saderia kicked up as roughly as she could to throw him away. With a gasp, the dingo flew into the air. Seconds later, he hit the ground a few paces away and crumpled to the earth, his sides heaving with pants. Weakly, he raised his head as she staggered to her paws. Shock glimmered in his eyes. When she took a step toward him, he hastily stumbled to his paws, then whipped around and raced away, his stomach dripping with blood.

A heavy sigh of relief shuddered out of Saderia's chest. Blinking rapidly and trying not to wince, she gazed out at the camp around her and felt her heart stop in horror.

Earsplitting howls echoed from every corner of the battlefield, ringing in her ears. Low growls rumbled beneath the shrieks of pain and

seemed to shake the very earth. The violent thuds of animals hitting the ground blended in with the cacophony of screams. The peaceful camp had erupted into a brutal, bloody battle. Dingoes and forest animals raced across the sand, lunging at each other with furious shouts. All around her, she could see nothing but shadowy animals locked in deadly battles. Animals lunged at each other from every direction and rolled across the ground. Thick, shadowy crowds of fighting animals covered the land all around her, making it impossible to see anything through the swarm of bloody, battling bodies.

The sticky scent of blood rose in the air, invading her senses and making her nose curl in disgust. With the salty tang so thick in the air, she could practically taste it in her mouth. Horror burned in her amber eyes and a wave of terror swept over her, drowning out the pain of her bloody shoulders. Battles raged all around her, filling the camp with overwhelming heat and deafening screams. Blood splattered the sand everywhere she looked. Everything around her seemed to blur together as animals crashed into each other and attacked with fangs and claws. Forest animals, outcasts, and pack members alike lashed out at each other and blended together in one frenzy of snarls, claws, and blood.

Cries of agony screamed in her ears. The sickening crunch of breaking bones sounded from the crowds of battling animals as fangs connected with legs and paws slammed into limbs. Saderia's eyes flicked wildly to the battles around her and her heart skipped in horror. All around her was nothing but blood and violence. Three dingoes on her left lunged at a blood-streaked forest animal lying on the ground with malice in their eyes. With evil snickers, the dogs snapped the forest animals' legs with a harsh crack and tore at his face while he struggled to get away. Only when several outcasts lunged to his rescue did the pack members stop.

Whipping around, she gazed out at the fighting crowds and felt her heart sink. The same bloody scenes repeated all around her, in every direction, all throughout the camp. Dingoes and forest animals threw themselves at each other with brutal shouts, clawing sides and gouging eyes. Two dingoes tumbled to the ground on her right, locked in a deadly battle. Blood poured out of grisly wounds in their sides and their eyes glowed with hatred. Behind her, a forest animal leapt at an enemy dingo and ripped a deep wound across his face, tearing an agonized howl out of his

throat. A strange, painful tingling rose in Saderia's chest at the sight and she winced at the dingo's scream even though he was the enemy.

Animals raced past her, bumping into her raw, wet shoulders or tumbling past her in a deadly fight. Deafening screams boomed in her ears until they seemed to echo inside her own mind. Pain twisted her heart as shrieks boomed out around her. Every time a scream pierced the air or a sickening crack of breaking bones sounded from the crowd, the agony in her chest grew stronger. Pain shot to every inch of her body until her entire being seemed to burn with agony. A gasp tore out of her throat and her legs shook beneath her.

Every flash of pain that tortured the fighters coursed into her. Every broken bone, every scar, every slap, every drop of blood shed from every animal multiplied the pain. Her Dream sense felt the pain of every animal, ally or enemy. Their pain was hers.

A gasp tore out of her throat and she squeezed her eyes shut as agony seared her entire body. Gritting her teeth, she drove her claws into the sand and shuddered as pain washed over her in waves, pushing her to the ground. It felt like a million tiny needles were being driven into her skin. Using all of her strength and sheer force of will, she forced herself to shake off the pain and drown out the earsplitting screams. Slowly, the agony started to fade, leaving cold tingles in her body. Fear blazed in her eyes, but she forced it away and hardened her gaze in a look of icy determination. If she let her emotions control her, her Dream sense would take over. As long as she remained calm, she would be fine...

Her mind whirled and her heart beat faster as she gazed out at the battles around her. Terror glowed in her eyes, but she pushed it away and forced herself not to flinch away from the battle. Somehow, she had to think logically. She had three goals she had to fulfill...One, to take care of her friends. Two, to find a way to scale Rock's enormous den and climb her way to the top of it to face the evil dingo Leader. And three, to kill him.

Terror clouded her mind. Her friends...Where were her friends? What was happening to them? Her heart skipped and her paws shook with desperation. At the same time, her eyes narrowed in determination. Somehow, she would find them. But where?

Gritting her teeth, she whipped around to gaze out at the battlefield. A cacophony of howls met her the instant she faced the miles of fighting

animals. Flattening her ears, she bunched her muscles and dove into the thick crowd of battling animals. Flurries of bloody bodies swirled past her. Claws lashed out and nicked her sides as she ran, but she ignored the pain that shot through her body. On every side, dingoes and forest animals collapsed, covered in wounds and drenched in blood, but she forced herself not to stop for them. Screams roared in her ears. Moving as quickly as possible, she weaved through the hordes of battling animals, her eyes darting wildly back and forth to search for her friends.

A growl rumbled in her throat when she spotted an enemy dingo lashing out at a blood-streaked forest animal several paces away. Gritting her teeth, she bunched her muscles and leapt into the air, soaring over the heads of a few fighting canines. Just as the dingo raised a paw to strike the forest animal, she slammed down onto his back, tearing a sharp yelp of alarm out of his throat. Her claws dug into his shoulders and a howl of pain escaped his mouth. His legs gave out and he crumpled to the ground. Instantly, Saderia lunged off his back and rolled when she hit the ground. Before the dingo could leap to his paws to attack, she raked her claws across his face, then whipped around and raced away before he could touch her. Behind her, the dingo staggered back in pain, while the forest animal lunged at him to fight.

Saderia's heart hammered as she wove through crowds of fighting. Where were her friends? "Dingo!" she screamed, struggling to be heard. "Dash! Where are you?"

Bright light shone on the horizon and shimmering rays of sunlight shot out across the sand, staining the shadowy battlefield with hazy light. An eerie glow crept across her fur. The burning light of the rising sun shone over the battlefield, making the entire fight seem hazy and almost surreal. Squinting, Saderia charged through the battlefield, her paws pounding in the same erratic rhythm of her racing heart. Sand flew up behind her with every step and her muscles screamed in protest, but she ignored the pain. All that mattered was finding her friends.

A deafening howl rose up over the screams, making Saderia freeze. Her head snapped to the side and her eyes widened in surprise at what she saw. Thunder fought a burly pack member several feet away, his dark brown eyes blazing with determination. Vicious snarls tore out of his chest as he lashed out, his movements more animated than they had been at the

meeting. A fierce light glowed in his eyes as he drove the pack member back.

Fury blazed in the pack member's eyes as he staggered backward. A growl rumbled in his throat. "Traitorous outcast scum!" Letting out a snarl, he lunged at Thunder before the outcast realized what was happening. His fangs drove into Thunder's shoulder and an agonized howl tore out of the outcast's throat. With one brutal movement, the pack member yanked Thunder's leg out from under him, then smacked him hard across the face to send him sprawling to the ground. Letting out a dangerous growl, the pack member slammed his paws down on Thunder's bloody shoulders to pin him to the ground and lunged toward his throat, baring his fangs.

Saderia's eyes blazed with fury. Without hesitating, she lunged at the enemy and landed squarely on his back. Her claws shot into his shoulders as he let out a yelp of pain. Rearing back, he tore his claws out of Thunder's shoulders, sending Saderia tumbling to the ground but giving Thunder time to scramble away. Her back smacked the earth and she rolled away with a groan as the pack dog rounded on her. Frantically, she struggled to leap to her paws as the dingo stalked toward her, a furious growl rumbling in his throat.

Shaking himself, Thunder staggered to his paws and gasped for air, ignoring the blood drenching his neck. A snarl rumbled in his throat. Bunching his muscles, he leapt to Saderia's side just as she stumbled to her paws, making the pack member's eyes widen in surprise, then narrow in fury. With a bloodthirsty growl, he raced toward them to attack.

The instant the dog raced toward them, Thunder lunged and sank his fangs deep into the enemy's leg when he raised a paw to attack. When the pack member flinched and tore his leg away, Saderia raced toward him and whipped her claws out at his face, digging deep gashes across his muzzle. A loud howl tore out of the pack member's throat and he staggered away from them, spattering the sand with blood. Before either of them could lash out at him, he whipped around and limped away from them as fast as his paws could carry him.

Thunder heaved a sigh the instant the enemy disappeared. Letting his ears droop with exhaustion, he turned to face Saderia tiredly, his dark brown eyes glowing with gratitude. "Thank you," he choked out, spilling blood from his mouth. "I owe you, Saderia."

A weak smile crossed her face. "It was nothing." Her eyes flicked wildly back and forth as snarls erupted from the battlefield, and her amber irises darkened with worry. Desperately, she turned back to face Thunder. "Thunder, have you seen Dingo?"

Thunder's eyes darkened and he grimly shook his head. "No, I haven't. He led us into the battle, but then he just...disappeared. I think he was headed toward Rock's den."

Saderia's heart sank. Feeling a wave of fear sweep over her, she whipped around and gazed out over the hordes of fighters. Rock's monstrous den loomed right over their heads, towering far above them. A shiver of dread slipped down her spine. In the faint light streaming out across the horizon, the dark den seemed even bigger, pure black against the fuzzy light. The brutal spikes jutted out above the heads of the fighters. The den at the very back of the enormous platform was shadowed in darkness, making it impossible to see inside. She could only imagine Rock lurking in the shadows of his monstrous den. Maybe he stood peering out at them through the gloom, laughing at all the violence his rule had caused.

A deadly growl rumbled in Saderia's throat and her claws dug into the sand. Fury flashed in her eyes. Instantly, she tore her gaze off the den and whirled around to face Thunder, her eyes gleaming in the faint light. "Dingo was headed toward Rock's den?"

Thunder nodded gravely, his eyes shadowed and grim.

Saderia took a deep breath and glanced back at the den, her amber irises cool and calculating. So Dingo had decided to kill Rock, after all. Why else would he be headed there? The thought hardly surprised her. She had made it her sole duty to kill Rock. Her two friends had probably done the same. Still, the idea sent a shiver racing through her when she thought of the brutal opposition he would meet on the way. A long time ago—when she had stayed at the outcasts' camp—Bunny had told her that Rock housed his favorites, the toughest and cruelest pack members, in the dens closest to his. That was no coincidence. His favorites had been placed close to him for protection in case anyone tried to get to him. A shadow crossed her face. Maybe Rock had known a fight was coming all along.

Saderia let out a shaky breath and turned to Thunder. "Thank you," she muttered, her voice absent. Her mind whirled as she struggled to think

of how to fight her way to Rock's den. More than likely, wherever she found Dingo, she would find Dash, too.

Thunder let out a sigh and nodded darkly. "No problem." The outcast Leader turned to dive back into the fray, then froze when a flash of movement caught his eye.

A red dingo suddenly lunged out from a nearby crowd of fighters and landed clumsily in front of Thunder. His yellow eyes blazed with exhilaration and his shaggy red tail flicked eagerly back and forth as he turned to face Saderia. "Are you looking for my brother? He's over there!"

"Rip!" Saderia's eyes widened in shock as she took in the appearance of Dingo's oldest living brother. Despite the intensity of the war around her, she found herself rolling her eyes at his unruly appearance. Rip was just like his brother—he could never come out of a fight without looking like death warmed over. Wounds lined his sides and blood spattered his fur, though it blended in with his natural dark red color. His yellow eyes glowed with excitement and his tail wagged eagerly back and forth. Clearly, a battle was right up his alley. Battling dangerous pack members was probably nothing more than a fun game to him.

Rip snickered at her stunned expression and lifted his tail to point toward Rock's monstrous den. "Last time I saw him, he was about three dens away from Rock's den."

Saderia's eyes glimmered with gratitude. "Thank you."

Rip simply grinned, then leapt back into the fray, letting out a wild, hyena-like laugh.

Not daring to waste a single moment, Saderia whipped around and raced toward Rock's den, her heart hammering wildly in her chest and her eyes glowing with hope. All she wanted was to find her friends. Only then could she focus on finding her true target...

Brutal fights swirled past her as she wove through crowds of fighters. Screams rang in her ears, but she forced herself to drown them out. Blood splashed against her paws as she staggered across the sand. Canines lashed out at her or slammed into her, making her stumble, but she caught herself and never stopped running. The closer she got to Rock's den, the thicker the fighting grew. Battling animals rushed past her on either side. Several times, she had no choice but to duck under an animal or leap over a fighting crowd to move on. Everywhere she turned, animals lashed out at

each other or struck out at her. Bloody bodies knocked into her. Claws, bodies, and blood swam before her eyes until it was impossible to see where she was going through the stream of fighting animals.

Her eyes darted up to the ominous den towering over the heads of the fighters around her. Daring to hope she was getting closer, she tore her gaze off the den and forced herself to move forward. Shoving past fighting animals, she pushed through the thick crowd and raced onward, then skidded to a halt when a dingo staggered out of the crowd in front of her. Before she could realize what was going on, the canine collapsed to the ground right in front of her and didn't move. His glassy, empty eyes stared up into hers and his mouth gaped open in a silent scream. Blood seeped out around his head, staining her paws.

Horror rose in Saderia's chest and she just barely choked back a scream. Closing her eyes, she forced herself to leap over the dead dingo and gritted her teeth to hide her guilt. She hadn't checked his leg for the ribbon that would tell her whether he was enemy or friend, but it didn't matter. Any death was a tragedy. Struggling to push the haunting image out of her mind, she gazed wildly around at the thick crowd, her heart pounding. With every frantic step she took, she moved closer to Rock's den. But where was Dingo?

A deafening howl suddenly rang out over the screams of the fighters, making her freeze in shock. Her eyes widened and a strong surge of hope shot through her. Dingo! Instantly, she whipped around to face the direction of the howl and felt her heart soar.

Dingo leapt to the top of a nearby sand dune den and threw back his head in a loud, powerful howl. His light brown eyes blazed as he shouted orders to the outcasts swarming around Rock's den. "Don't back down! Fight them just like in practice! Clear the way to Rock's den!" His eyes swept over the fighters below him and his shaggy brown tail lashed with fury. "Brawny, help Tear! Lightning, use your speed! Run around him and strike from behind!" The rest of his orders were drowned out in the roar of howls that erupted from the outcasts around him.

Saderia's heart skipped and she desperately shoved through the thick crowd toward Dingo. Before she could reach him, the canine leapt off the den and disappeared into the vicious fray. Even though she couldn't see him

through the screaming horde of fighters, she could still hear his strong, furious voice shouting orders and encouragement.

Her eyes widened in understanding and her heart skipped when she realized what Dingo was doing. The canine must have realized there was no way he could fight his way to the enormous rock on his own. Instead, he had led the army straight to Rock's den to let them fight Rock's forces and clear a path. His fierce voice echoed in her ears. No matter how hard she strained to hear, she couldn't make out individual words, but she could hear the conviction in his tone and could tell that he was pushing the outcasts hard. And they were *listening* to him. In the heat of the battle, it seemed as though *he* was their Leader.

Ducking under a fierce strike from a pack member, Saderia lashed out and sent the enemy staggering away, clutching his bloody face. Pushing away her fears, she turned and fought her way through the crowd as quickly as she could. Pack members lashed out and scored her sides wherever she moved. An enemy lunged toward her, but she instantly ducked down, forcing him to sail right over her. Another enemy lashed out at her face, but she rolled away from him before he could touch her. The burly pack member started to lumber after her, but an outcast bowled into him from the side before he could get close. With a howl of alarm, the pack member collapsed to the ground, while the outcast snarled in fury.

Lashing out furiously with her claws, Saderia slashed through hordes of pack members and staggered through the thick fray of fighting, desperate to get to Dingo. Just when she started to hope she might be getting closer, a deafening roar rose up above the screams of battle, freezing her in place. With a gasp of shock, she whipped around and gaped in amazement when she realized where the roar had come from.

A shadowy figure leapt to the top of a rocky den a few feet away and gazed at the wild fray with blazing amber eyes. His dark, tufted tail flicked eagerly back and forth and his claws scraped the rocky den. Blood soaked his dark brown fur. Saderia's eyes widened when she recognized the dark figure. Dash!

With gleaming amber eyes, Dash shouted orders at the outcasts and forest animals swarming the den, his booming voice as powerful as Dingo's. "You two, run away and get to the healers! You, help him! You, go

for his eyes—he's weak!" His eyes blazed with determination and his voice echoed with fury. "Push harder! We must kill Rock!"

From the other side of the crowd surrounding Rock's den, Dingo let out a deafening howl. "Keep fighting! We have to kill Rock!"

"Kill Rock! Kill Rock! Kill Rock!" The words spread through the battlefield like wildfire until every outcast and forest animal screamed them at the top of their lungs. The chant echoed around the camp, rising up over the screams and howls of the fighters as the army fought back against the pack members, pushing their way closer to Rock's den.

Lashing his tail in excitement, Dash leapt from the den and dove into the violent fray with a furious snarl. Saderia's eyes widened in shock as the lion vanished from sight. Apparently, she wasn't the only one who had thought to run to Rock's den to kill him. Instead, she was the only one not on top of things. Her eyes narrowed in determination and a sense of fury and strength rose in her chest. She would have to fix that.

A fiery glow lit up her eyes. Pausing in the midst of the fray, she glanced at the place where Dingo had disappeared and the spot where Dash had vanished. Which friend should she go to first? Her eyes clouded with indecision and she hesitated, then narrowed her eyes and gritted her teeth. Without hesitating, she whipped around and raced in the direction of the spot where Dash had disappeared. All she wanted to do was make sure he was okay. Only when she knew for certain could she add her own voice to the chant and kill Rock.

Good job. Dastarius's proud voice echoed in Dash's head, bringing a smile to his face. His amber eyes glowed in the fuzzy light of the rising sun. Wherever his father might be, he was watching him and he was proud that Dash had taken it upon himself to lead the forest animals against Rock. His heart pounded with excitement and his tail lashed eagerly back and forth as he weaved through crowds of fighting animals. Now he could prove to his father that he *could* be a leader. A wild blaze of determination glowed in his eyes. He wanted to be the one to kill Rock. No one would be able to overlook him then. He would be Prince Dash, the one who had killed the evil dingo overlord and freed the outcasts! No one would be able to steal his glory then!

A low growl erupted behind him, making him skid to a halt in the thick of the battle, surrounded by bloody bodies lashing out at each other. Instantly, he whipped around to face the source of the sound and narrowed his eyes when he saw a burly dingo charging toward him. Just as the dingo bunched his muscles to spring, Dash lunged at him and slammed into him without warning, sending him tumbling to the ground. The instant the dingo's legs buckled, Dash leapt away so he wouldn't collapse to the ground with him. His claws raked the enemy's face when the dog struggled to catch himself. A loud yelp tore out of the enemy's throat and he winced, sending him collapsing to the ground.

Instantly, Dash lunged to pin him down, but the dingo lashed out before he could get close, scoring a deep gash across his shoulder. Wincing, Dash drew back, gritting his teeth against the pain. As soon as he staggered away, the pack member struggled to push himself to his paws. Dash's eyes flashed and he shook off the pain. Without hesitating, he lunged and drove his fangs into the dingo's leg before he could stand. A howl ripped out of the dingo's throat and he crumpled to the ground. Tearing his fangs out of the enemy's leg and tasting blood, Dash instantly raked his claws across the dog's face. The pack member yelped in pain and rolled away from him. Before Dash could chase after him, he staggered to his paws and raced away to find a less dangerous enemy, trailing blood behind him.

A sneer crossed Dash's face as blood dribbled from his fangs. Dastarius's fighting lessons had really come in handy. Shaking off the pain, he gazed at the fighting crowds dotting the land around him, scanning the fray for his own forest animals. Frustration shot through him when he realized many of the forest animals had started to fall back, their eyes dull with exhaustion. A growl rumbled in his throat. This was no time for slacking!

Bunching his muscles, he shoved through crowds of fighters, shouldering enemy dingoes aside. Bloody bodies rushed past him as he pushed his way through the crowd. Fighting past a thick group of battling canines, he took a deep breath, then lunged into the air. Swiftly, he soared over the heads of the fighters and landed neatly atop a nearby rock den. Smoothly, he whipped around to gaze at the fighting spread out before him.

Awe crept into his eyes as he stepped up to the edge of the den. Hundreds of canines and forest animals crowded around Rock's den like a

huge ocean of blood-streaked bodies. Deafening screams echoed from the wild fray, assaulting his ears with a cacophony louder than a thunderclap. Through the enormous mass of struggling animals, he couldn't even see the sand. Blood drenched the fur of the battling animals, nearly hiding their natural fur color. Dozens of grisly wounds lined their sides. Several collapsed under the fray and disappeared.

Fire blazed in Dash's eyes. "Don't give up! Keep fighting! Kill Rock! Kill Rock!"

All of the forest animals surrounding the monstrous den gritted their teeth. A blaze of determination seemed to sweep over them. Each of them suddenly fought back harder and pushed their way toward Rock's enormous den, hissing and snarling with fury. The chant rose up from the crowd even louder than before. "Kill Rock! Kill Rock!"

A faint sneer crossed Dash's face, but worry tickled the back of his mind as he stared out at the legions of battling animals. A lot of them wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer...Narrowing his eyes, he whipped around and gazed out at the rest of the battlefield outside the thick patch of fighting around Rock's den. Hundreds of dingoes and forest animals lashed out at each other throughout the wide camp, but compared to the huge crowd around Rock's den, the rest of the battlefield seemed practically barren.

His eyes flicked rapidly across the camp, searching for runners who carried herbs that would fight off exhaustion. If a runner came bearing those herbs soon, the forest animals would be able to keep fighting and pushing their way toward Rock's den. Would a runner dare to set foot near the violent fray, though? Thick fighting covered the ground all around Rock's den. Hardly any inexperienced fighters would dare go near such intense carnage. Just the sight of all the fighting would probably scare them off. Even if they did try to enter the fray, with no fighting experience, they might not last long...

Worry glimmered in Dash's eyes. That wasn't good...Gritting his teeth, he tore his gaze off the rest of the battlefield and stared at the thick fighting around him. His eyes locked on a burly dingo slashing at a bloody cheetah. Without thinking, he lunged off the den and landed roughly on the dingo's back. A yelp tore out of the dog's throat as he collapsed beneath him. With a dangerous snarl, Dash drove his fangs into the back of his neck.

The pack dog let out a wild howl and reared back instantly to throw him off. As soon as he started to fall, Dash twisted in midair and landed smoothly on his paws, then whipped around to face the dingo, expecting a fight. Before he had a chance to attack, though, the dingo staggered to his paws and whipped around to race away as fast as he could.

A heavy breath shuddered out of Dash's throat. Whipping around, he paused when he saw the cheetah stagger shakily to his paws, his eyes wide with gratitude.

"Thank you," the cheetah gasped. Before Dash could respond, the blood-spattered cheetah limped away from the fray as quickly as possible, his face pale with pain and the shadow of death.

With a flash of recognition, Dash realized he had saved Loki's father. Not pausing to dwell on that fact, he whirled around and charged into the heat of the battle, his eyes blazing with determination. Hundreds of fights swirled past him and animals shoved against his shoulders as he ran. Lashing out, he swiped the back legs of a pack member out from under him when he raced past, sending him tumbling to the ground. When another dingo lashed out at him from the side, he ducked under his paw, then instantly whipped around and smacked him hard across the face, forcing him to stagger backwards.

Dimly, he could hear Dingo's voice echoing ahead of him, shouting orders over the screams of battle to his newly acquired pack. Relief shot through Dash as he ducked under an attack and pushed deeper into the crowd. At least Dingo was safe. At the same time, a darker sense of annoyance shot through him and his eyes narrowed. Somehow, he had to get to Rock before Dingo did, or he would get none of the glory. All the praise would be handed over to Mr. 'Deep and Misunderstood' Dingo over there, while he sat in the shadows for the rest of his life. Vaguely, he wondered where Saderia was, but he pushed the thought away. His best friend was probably fine. Everyone in the army knew it was their job to protect the Princess and the leaders above all else. Besides, she could look after herself.

Slowly, the wild 'Kill Rock' chant began to die away. Screams echoed out over the fierce words until the chant vanished completely. Several forest animals fell back with a scream as pack members shoved them away from Rock's den. Dash's eyes narrowed in annoyance and a sigh

escaped his throat. Skidding to a halt, he peered through the wild crowds, searching for the nearest den. His gaze locked on a nearby rock and he instantly bunched his muscles to leap, then froze when a high, shrill voice shouted his name.

Blinking in surprise, Dash froze, then whipped around to face the source of the voice. His eyes widened in surprise when a flash of vibrant yellow fur shot toward him and dove between his legs to hide. With a soft gasp, he looked down and blinked in shock when he saw his tiny kraguer friend hiding underneath him, quivering in fear. “Jeb?”

Jeb gazed up at him with wide, terrified blue/green eyes. “D-Dash... I...I wanted to make sure you and the...the others had herbs.” With shaky paws, he gestured to a thatched bag full of herbs lying at his feet. “The other runners didn’t want to come over here...”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock, then glimmered in excitement. “Thanks, Jeb!” A bright grin crossed his face. “We really need these!”

Jeb managed a weak, shaky smile. “Good. Can...Can you get me out of here?”

Dash nodded absently and glanced at the thick battles raging around him. A sharp hiss and a quick slash of his claws sent an enemy stumbling away from them when he tried to claw Jeb. Blood splattered Jeb’s bristling yellow fur, but thankfully, it was neither his nor Dash’s. The creature’s eyes grew round with horror, but Dash ignored the fear in his blue/green irises. Before the kraguer could protest, he grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, then tossed him high into the air. A shriek escaped Jeb’s throat as he sailed over the heads of the fighters, then cut off abruptly when he crashed down atop a rock den a few feet away.

Instantly, Dash grabbed the bag of herbs, bunched his muscles, and leapt after him, soaring over thick crowds of fighters. In one neat movement, he landed on the den and whipped around to gaze out at the fighting. Beside him, Jeb shakily pushed himself to his paws and stared out at the fray with wide, horrified blue and green eyes. All the fur along his back rose up in fear at the sight of the tense fighting and a whimper escaped his throat.

Ignoring Jeb’s fear, Dash let out a loud roar. “Who needs strengthening herbs?”

A thunderous chorus of 'Me' rose up from the forest animals. Dropping the herb bag onto the den, Dash pulled out herb after herb and tossed them into the exhausted crowd. Steadily, the supply of herbs in the bag dwindled down to about halfway.

With nearly every forest animal taken care of, Dash grinned and glanced back at Jeb. "Thanks for bringing these, Jeb. You should get back to the runners." His gaze shot to the barren land on the opposite side of the rock den. On the other side of the den, barely any fighters dotted the land. Most of the fighting was centered between the dens around Rock's monstrous formation. Smiling faintly, Dash glanced at Jeb and nodded toward the barren land on the other side. "Jump down over there, Jeb. There will be less fighting."

The tiny kraguer gave him a shaky nod before turning to stumble toward the edge of the den. Taking a deep breath, he leapt down on the other side of the den and bounded away as fast as his legs could carry him. Tearing his gaze off the fleeing creature, Dash grabbed the bag of herbs and lunged back into the fray. The second his paws touched the blood-spattered ground, he scanned the crowd for any sign of Dingo. Before he could race deeper into the crowds to find him, a sudden loud voice froze him in place. "Dash!"

His eyes widened in shock and he whipped around to face the voice in surprise. The second he turned, a familiar orange figure lunged over a crowd of bloody, fighting canines and landed heavily on the ground in front of him. Staggering to regain her balance, Saderia stumbled over to him and looked up sharply, her amber eyes wide with alarm. Gruesome wounds lined her face and sides, and blood soaked her bristling fur. Heavy pants shuddered out of her chest and one of her paws shook beneath her, but when she looked up and met Dash's stunned gaze, a glow of relief lit up her amber eyes.

"Dash!" she choked out, her voice coming out as a shaky gasp. "You're okay!"

Dash's eyes widened in shock, then lit up with relief. "Of course I'm okay!" he exclaimed, dropping the herb bag and staggering closer to her. "Did you ever doubt me?" A weak smile crossed her face and he tried to return it, but the grin turned into a grimace as he took in her rough appearance. From the grisly wounds lining her sides, he could tell she had

seen way too many fights. How many had attacked her on her way to him? Worry burned in his mind. Deep down, he knew Saderia could fight, but the thought of her being in the midst of the thickest, heaviest fighting in the camp sent shivers down his spine.

His eyes narrowed and a stern glint crept into his amber gaze. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the safer part of the battlefield?"

Saderia blinked in surprise, then narrowed her eyes in a glare. Her fur bristled in indignation. "And *why* should I be in the safer part?"

Dash blinked several times in disbelief. "Because it's...safer!" A frown crossed his face and he sharply flicked his tail. "I can handle things here, Saderia. I'm going to kill Rock."

"I'm staying here." Saderia lashed her tail in determination. "I already fought my way to the middle of this madness. I'm not leaving. I'm going to help you kill Rock."

"But..."

"It will be easier with the two of us," Saderia insisted, sternly cutting him off. "Dash, this is the worst part of camp. The fighting here is so thick, you can barely take two steps without getting attacked. If you think I'm leaving *you* alone in the midst of the most dangerous part of the fight, you're crazy. We're supposed to be a team, remember?"

Dash started to protest, then paused and heaved a heavy sigh when he saw the fire in her eyes. If Saderia was *that* determined, talking her out of it would be a harder task than taking down Rock. "Fine." He hesitated, then glanced at the bag of herbs at his feet.

Saderia's gaze followed and curiosity lit up her eyes. "What's that?"

"They're strengthening herbs," he murmured, ducking when he saw a dog lash out from the left. Biting back a hiss, he kicked out his back paw and sent the dingo staggering back. Rolling his eyes, he glanced firmly back at Saderia. "I need to give them to Dingo."

Her eyes lit up with determination. "Good idea. I'll help you get to him." Quickly, she leaned down and grabbed the bag of herbs by the threadbare straps to carry it.

The instant she bent down to pick up the bag, Dash felt alarm shoot through him. Right behind her, a pack member bunched his muscles and lunged at her while she was unaware. Shock burned in Dash's eyes and he instantly unsheathed his claws. "Look out!"

Before Saderia could look back, Dash leapt over her and lunged at the dingo. A loud howl tore out of the pack dog's throat when they slammed into each other. A gasp of surprise sounded behind him, but Dash didn't get to look back as he fell to the ground. Gritting his teeth, he drove his claws into the dingo's shoulders a second before they smacked the earth. The dog kicked Dash away, tearing his claws out of his shoulders. Snarling in fury, he lashed out at Dash, but the lion rolled away before he could claw him.

Instantly, the dingo staggered to his paws, while Dash leapt to his feet. His amber eyes blazed with rage as he watched the enemy. Fury burned in his blood and his fur bristled with hatred. No one messed with Saderia. Before the dog could regain his balance, Dash lunged at him, baring his fangs in a furious snarl. The enemy instantly tried to step away, but instead of sailing into him, Dash landed just a few inches in front of him. His paw instantly darted out and slashed the enemy's leg while he was still trying to dodge away.

A yelp of surprise tore out of the pack member's throat as his legs were swept out from under him. Unbalanced, he tumbled helplessly to the ground, his face smacking the earth with a sharp crack. When the dingo struggled to pick himself up, Dash whirled around and slammed his claws down on his muzzle, making him wince and stagger back to the ground. Without hesitating, Dash clawed his side and sent him tumbling onto his back with a sharp cry. Before the dog could lash out or roll away, Dash leapt on top of him and slammed the dingo's paws against the ground to pin him. Alarm blazed in the canine's eyes, but before he could fight back, Dash lunged and drove his fangs into his neck.

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "Dash! What are you doing?" she shouted, bounding toward him and gaping at him in disbelief. "Let him up! Now!"

Her words washed over him like a bucket of ice water, making his eyes pop open. Blinking in surprise, he tore his fangs out of the dingo's throat and looked up in surprise. The instant his fangs left his neck, the enemy let out a hoarse gasp. Before Dash could react, the dog kicked up with his back paws and sent him staggering away with a groan. The instant Dash moved away from him, the canine leapt to his paws and raced away from him as fast as he possibly could, half-stumbling in his desperation to get away.

Dash flattened his ears and glared after the dingo, a shadow crossing his bloody face.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and shot him a stern glare, hiding the unease in her eyes. “I thought we were trying to avoid casualties—on either side!”

Dash lashed his tail in frustration. “He was going to *kill* you! Besides, if he hadn’t run off, he would have just become *another* enemy we would have to fight off!”

Saderia’s eyes narrowed uncertainly and she looked away. “Well...I guess, but...”

Dash heaved a sigh and rested his tail gently on her shoulder, his expression softening. “It’s war, Saderia. Animals die in war.” His eyes flicked to the abandoned bag of herbs lying on the ground, and he hastily bent down to pick it up. “Come on,” he murmured through the straps, giving Saderia a weak smile. “Let’s get these to Dingo.”

Saderia hesitated, then managed a nod. When Dash bounded off into the fray, she quickly fell into step behind him. Even as she bounded after the lion, a gleam of unease haunted her amber eyes. Something besides the heat of the battle around her made her fur bristle with nervousness. Shaking it off, she raced through the fray as fast as she could. Whether something was off or not didn’t matter. All that mattered was winning the war.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rock's Proposition

An earsplitting howl erupted from the wild battlefield, making Saderia look up in surprise. Her eyes grew round with shock and she instantly skidded to a halt with Dash close beside her. Two snarling canines stumbled right past them, then disappeared into the fray, revealing what lay in front of them. Dingo stood just a few paces away, his light brown eyes glowing with determination and his breath heaving out of his chest in heavy pants. Two burly pack members lashed out at him, but he easily danced away from their attacks and slashed at them with quick swipes of his paws. Blood drenched his shaggy, unkempt fur and grisly wounds lined his sides and face, but a fiery glow burned in his eyes. Beside him, a shaggy red dingo covered in scars fought back against the two pack members, flicking his tail eagerly back and forth and laughing like a crazed hyena. Rip.

Saderia's eyes widened in amazement as she stared at the two brothers. Somehow, Rip must have fought his way toward the front of the battle around Rock's den. Now the two brothers fought side by side, driving back the two muscular pack members with quick swipes of their paws and dodging away from clumsy attacks. Together, the two lashed out at the pack members at the same time and sent them stumbling back onto the ground with one quick movement. When the pack members whipped around and raced away from them, trailing blood behind them, Rip let out a satisfied laugh and clapped Dingo playfully on the back. When Dingo grinned back in return, the shaggy red dingo flicked him with his tail, then turned and dove into the vicious battles surrounding them, laughing the whole way. His younger brother instantly turned to follow him, then froze and pricked his ears when Saderia shouted out to stop him.

"Dingo!" she called, racing toward him with Dash close behind her. "Wait!"

Dingo whipped around, then blinked in surprise when his two friends skidded to a halt in front of him. "Saderia? Dash?"

The sight of his rough appearance made Saderia wince involuntarily now that she could see him up close. Dozens of deep, grisly wounds covered his body and blood seemed to drip off of every bit of his fur. One of his ears seemed even more shredded than normal. At least half of it was hanging by a mere shred.

Dingo frowned and glanced at the bag of herbs looped around Dash's neck, his eyes gleaming with wonder. "What is that?"

"Herbs." Dash quickly shook the bag off his neck and dropped it at Dingo's feet. His amber eyes glowed in the bright rays of sunlight shining out over the battlefield. "They give you strength. You should throw them to your dingoes."

Dingo's eyes lit up with excitement. "Great. Thanks!" The desert dog leaned down to pick up the bag, then froze when a low growl sounded somewhere behind him. Dropping the bag, he looked up sharply and stumbled back with a yelp of alarm when an enemy dingo lunged toward him, his fangs dripping with blood and his eyes gleaming with fury. Without warning, another dingo leapt out at them from the side, letting out a low, dangerous growl. Just as the three friends whipped around to face the new attacker, another enemy leapt at them from the other side, stalking toward them with glinting eyes and a deadly sneer. The three canines completely surrounded them.

Saderia's eyes narrowed in determination, while Dash's eyes flashed with fury. Without a word, the two of them turned their backs to each other to face the two approaching canines. Beside them, Dingo whipped around to face the other pack member that had leapt toward them, his light brown eyes gleaming in the bright morning light.

The enemy canine lunged toward Dingo, but the shaggy brown dog leapt toward him instantly, meeting him with a loud smack in midair. Both canines sailed toward the ground, but Dingo leapt away from the enemy just before they smacked the earth. The shaggy brown canine landed roughly on his paws, while his dark brown enemy slammed onto the earth a few feet away. Instantly, Dingo raced toward him and whipped his claws toward the enemy's face, but the pack member rolled away before he could strike him. Hastily, the enemy staggered to his paws and lashed out at Dingo with a quick swipe of his paw, but Dingo ducked under the attack. Wasting no time, Dingo raked his claws across the dog's chest before he could put his

raised paw back on the ground. With the dingo unbalanced, he smacked him across the face, sending him stumbling backward.

“How are the forest animals doing?” he called, glancing over his shoulder with calm, unbothered light brown eyes.

Dash ducked under a quick blow from the pitch black pack member facing him and raked his claws across his enemy’s face, sending him stumbling back. When the dingo flinched and staggered away, Dash lashed out twice with his claws, raking deep wounds across both legs. His amber eyes flashed in the bright light and a grave shadow crept over his face. “They’re already wearing out. I don’t know how long the herbs will keep their strength up.” He glanced over his shoulder out of the corner of his eyes. “What about the dingoes?”

Dingo winced when the enemy’s claws raked across his face, but he ducked before the pack dog could push him to the ground. “They’re weakening, too.” Gritting his teeth, he sidestepped another attack, then dove toward the dingo’s leg to sink his fangs into his flesh. The enemy dodged away from the attack and smacked him on the side of the head, sending him staggering to the ground. Just seconds before he fell, Dingo caught himself and whipped his claws across the dog’s chest before he could strike him. A low growl rumbled in his throat. “Rock’s forces are stronger than I thought!”

Saderia’s eyes clouded with worry, but she ducked when her attacker aimed a blow at her head. Quickly, she raked her claws across the dingo’s face, then clawed at his legs and his chest when he winced and staggered backward. “What can we do?”

“Maybe we could—” Dash’s voice broke off in a sudden, sharp hiss of pain when his enemy lunged toward him and drove his fangs deep into Dash’s leg.

Fear glowed in Saderia’s eyes. Without thinking, she whipped around to help him, then blinked in surprise when Dash yanked his leg away from the canine with one sharp snap, ignoring the blood that spilled out over his dark brown fur. The canine’s jaw snapped at the sudden movement and he staggered back with a yelp of pain.

Dash’s amber eyes blazed with a fierceness she had never seen before. Moving so fast he nearly blurred, he lunged at the dingo and slapped him across the face, then tore a gash open on his chest when he winced.

With a quick sweep of his paw, he knocked the dingo's legs out from under him. When the dingo let out a howl and started to fall, Dash slammed his paw into his shoulder to catch him and dug his claws into his flesh. Before the pack member could react, Dash grabbed the dingo's leg and snapped it sharply to the side, making him fall back onto his side with a loud shriek of pain. The second he was down, Dash kicked him squarely in the chest, sending him rolling away from him with a harsh gasp.

Without hesitating, Dash whipped around and lunged right over Saderia's head. With a gasp, she whirled around just in time to see him slam into the pack member behind her, sending them both tumbling to the ground. The pack member landed roughly on his back, but instead of trying to pin him down, Dash raked his claws across his belly. A loud howl tore out of the dingo's throat. Gritting his teeth, the dog drove his claws into Dash's shoulders and shoved him off, leaving long gashes across his legs. While Dash stumbled away, wincing in pain, the enemy canine leapt to his paws and lunged toward him.

The dog aimed a quick attack to his face, but Dash instantly ducked to avoid it. As soon as he ducked, though, the dingo swung his paw back down and raked his claws across Dash's face. A yelp of pain escaped the lion's throat and he staggered backward, his muzzle dripping with blood. Before he could regain his balance, the dingo slammed his paw into Dash's legs, sweeping them out from under him. With a loud cry of alarm, the dark lion smacked onto the ground. Letting out a cruel snarl, the pack member drove his claws into Dash's exposed stomach, tearing an agonized cry of pain out of Dash's throat.

Fury blazed in Saderia's eyes. Before the pack member could hurt Dash any further, she lunged at him and landed right on his back. Surprise shone in the dingo's eyes and a stunned yelp tore out of his throat. His cry soon turned into a strangled howl of pain when she drove her claws into his shoulders. Rearing back, he sent her tumbling to the ground. Gritting her teeth, Saderia fell painfully to the sand, but instantly picked herself up and whirled around to glare at the dingo, her eyes blazing. At once, the pack member whipped around to face her, a low growl rumbling in his throat. The dingo started to take a step toward her, then paused when Dash stumbled to his feet and stepped up beside Saderia. Side by side, Saderia and Dash faced the enemy with flashing eyes and dangerous snarls.

The pack member hesitated for half a second, then narrowed his eyes and let out a reluctant growl. Whipping around, he raced away from them into the fray, knowing that in his condition, he was outnumbered.

A soft sigh of relief escaped Saderia's mouth. Letting her tense muscles relax, she glanced back at Dingo just in time to see him send his attacker stumbling away with one brutal swipe of his paw. Soon, the enemy vanished into the fray, howling with pain.

Panting heavily, Dingo whipped around to face his friends, a shadow darkening his eyes. "We have to find a different way to Rock's den. It's just too protected in the front."

Dash's eyes widened in desperation. "Is there any way to get up from the back?"

Dingo grimly shook his head, his eyes dark. "No. The entire den is completely surrounded by fighting. There's no way to get past all those dingoes."

Dash's eyes flashed with determination and his tail lashed furiously back and forth. "There's got to be some way! Trying to force our way through is getting us nowhere! For every dingo we kill, two more show up! There's got to be another way!"

A low growl rumbled in Dingo's throat. "There *is* no other way! The only thing we *can* do is fight, but I doubt the outcasts will hold up much longer! I can't keep pushing them like this! If I do, they'll all die!"

Saderia's eyes drifted out to the rest of the battlefield as they spoke and a grave feeling of dread rose in her chest. Beyond the plethora of fighting around Rock's den, the rest of the battlefield seemed empty, but with fewer fighters dotting the land, grim sights stood out. Lifeless, blood-spattered bodies lay strewn across the sandy earth—several forest animals and too many dingoes to count. Battling crowds of canines and forest animals stumbled over the bodies or kicked them aside like dust. Horror and disgust rose in Saderia's throat. All around the battlefield, forest animals stumbled back in pain, their breath heavy and their eyes wide with agony and exhaustion. Blood soaked their fur. Outcasts seemed to stumble away from the fight in droves, covered in wounds and drenched with blood. Every step they took was clumsy and faltering. Some of them collapsed in exhaustion. Dread gleamed in her eyes. They couldn't keep this up much longer...

Dash's amber eyes flashed. "Not all of them will die. The harder we push them, the harder they'll fight and the sooner we'll get to Rock's den! We just need to kill him! Then we can end this!"

Dingo lashed his tail in frustration. "What good will killing Rock do if all of the outcasts and forest animals are dead? Even if we manage to get up there, Rock's forces will still be too strong! They'll just fight us off and throw us off the rock!"

"But..."

A deafening roar cut off Dash's protest. Blinking in shock, Dash whipped around and gazed out at the battlefield in the direction of the roar, while his two friends whirled around with the same stunned expressions.

Another earsplitting roar boomed out over the battlefield, echoing in the ears of every fighter. "Retreat!"

Saderia's eyes widened and her breath caught in her throat. *Makero!* A jolt of shock shot through her as his words echoed around the bloody camp, making her heart stop in her chest. *Retreat?* Had she heard correctly?

Dash's eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in disbelief. A shaky gasp tore out of his throat and he staggered back a few paces, shaking his head as if in denial. "*No!*" Stumbling backwards, he lashed his tail and gritted his teeth, then whipped around and raced into the violent fray around Rock's den as fast as his paws could carry him, heading desperately toward the tyrant's den.

Saderia's eyes widened in shock and a gasp tore out of her throat. "Dash! Come back here! What are you doing?" Desperately, she lurched forward to chase after him, but Dingo caught her and pressed his paw warningly against her shoulder to stop her.

His shadowed brown eyes flashed with seriousness. "Don't. You stay here and help your Dad get everyone out of here. I'll get Dash."

Before she could protest, the canine whipped around and charged after Dash, letting out a loud, echoing howl. "Retreat! Outcasts and forest animals, retreat!"

Makero's voice echoed his words. "Retreat! Forest animals, retreat!"

Saderia's heart sank with dread and her mind whirled. All over the battlefield, forest animals tore themselves away from their fights and raced toward the edge of camp as fast as they could, gasping and calling for others to retreat. Several of them pressed against each other and limped

away as quickly as they could. Outcasts reluctantly dragged themselves away from the battle and started to race away. Bloody outcasts and forest animals streamed past her on all sides, bumping into her shoulders and jostling her in their desperation to get away. Hundreds of animals poured out of the violent fray, dodging desperately away from a few last strikes from the pack members.

Pain burned in Saderia's chest as she watched the scarred animals stumble away, practically delirious from their wounds. A deep, burning rage rose in her chest when she heard snickers from the pack members. Biting back her anger, she turned and raced in the direction Dash had run as fast as her paws could carry her. No matter what Dingo said, she couldn't leave Dash behind. A desperate cry tore out of her throat, tinged with pain and regret. "Retreat!"

Tears blurred her vision as she stumbled past hordes of fleeing outcasts and forest animals. Pack members laughed at them as they fled and barely seemed to notice her. Most of Rock's forces stood strong with barely any wounds, while her own troops fled in fear, drenched in blood. Pain and regret burned in her heart and her wounds suddenly seemed to ache even more strongly than before.

They had lost. The battle had been for nothing. All those animals lay dead for nothing...

"No!" Dash raced through the crowd of fleeing animals and laughing pack members as fast as he could, his dark brown tail streaming wildly out behind him. His heart pounded frantically in his chest and his eyes blazed with desperation. Pack members lashed out at him as he soared past them, but he barely noticed the sting of pain from their bloody claws. The exhaustion haunting his body seemed to fade away into a wild, crazed sense of determination and desperation. They *couldn't* lose! They had to win! Dash's eyes blazed and he gritted his teeth in fury. He had to kill Rock now! He had to prove to his father and to everyone else that he could do it! Why were the others retreating? They couldn't leave now!

Animals surged past him, drenched in blood and covered in scars, but he barely noticed their wounds. Ignoring them, he raced toward Rock's monstrous den, desperate to kill the dingo tyrant. Rock's forces didn't scare him. He wasn't going to die. He *couldn't* die. He had a ghost on his side,

and Dastarius had more or less told him he wouldn't be killed, so he had nothing to fear. Nothing at all.

Vaguely, he heard someone behind him shout his name, but he ignored it. It was probably Dingo, trying to steal his glory and force him to come back with them. Determination hardened Dash's gaze. He couldn't go back with them. Not now. He had to kill Rock first. He *would* kill Rock first! The battle couldn't be lost! He would win it!

Letting out a furious snarl, he lunged past the hordes of fleeing army members and stumbled out on the barren, empty desert sand. The instant his paws hit the ground, he glanced up at his surroundings and froze. Fear trickled into his mind and his heart stopped when he realized where he was. No forest animals or outcasts remained in the area closest to Rock's den, the place where the fighting had been thick only moments ago. Only their bodies were left lying there. The entire area was practically empty...except for an enormous line of dingoes standing all around Rock's den, guarding it from attackers. Row after row of burly pack members stood between him and Rock's den, chuckling to themselves and searching for any survivors with bloodthirsty eyes.

Dash's heart sank and his paws grew numb with terror. No one else was around. When he glanced back over his shoulder, all he could see were fleeing dingoes and pack members stalking after them, blocking his exit and rapidly trapping him in a circle in the empty, blood-soaked area in front of Rock's den. A cold sweat broke out on his brow. Maybe he really could die in battle...

His mind whirled. No way could he take on dozens of dingoes alone. Thinking quickly, he whipped around and darted toward one of the empty dingo dens dotting the area in front of Rock's den. Before any pack members could spot him, he leapt into the shadows of the den and crouched down to hide. He could practically hear his heart pounding in his ears. How was he going to get out of this one?

A gasp of alarm tore out of Saderia's throat as she dashed across the sandy ground. In front of her, an entire line of pack members marched out from the base of Rock's den, pushing the fleeing animals back. Her paws slammed into the sand to stop her, but she couldn't make herself stop in time. The last of the forest animals and outcasts disappeared behind her,

racing away from the battlefield and leaving her all alone. Unable to turn back in time, Saderia skidded to an abrupt halt right in front of the legions of pack members standing directly underneath Rock's monstrous den. Behind her, the land was empty of life. All of the fleeing animals gathered on the opposite edge of the camp. She was alone.

Her heart sank, but just as she started to leap to her paws in a desperate attempt to flee, an eerie sound froze her in place. A low, cruel chuckling sound echoed out over the camp, raising all the fur on her back. Fear glowed in her amber irises, and she slowly raised her head to look up at the huge, rocky platform towering far above her head. A chill swept through her entire body. The dark, shadowy form of Rock stood on the edge of the platform, gazing down at her with gleaming dark brown eyes and a bloodthirsty sneer. Cruel laughter escaped his throat as he stared down at the bloody battlefield.

Saderia's heart skipped a beat. Desperately, she rose to her paws in a frantic attempt to escape. A sharp cry sounded behind her, making her whip around in fear.

"Saderia!" Dingo raced toward her as fast as his paws could carry him, his light brown eyes gleaming with terror. Somehow, she had either gotten ahead of him or the canine had turned back. Several feet of empty, blood-spattered land stood between the two of them. Behind Dingo, Makero raced toward her as fast as he could, his green eyes wide with horror.

Staggering to her paws, Saderia instantly turned to race toward them, but before any of them could get close to each other, Rock made a quick motion with his tail. Immediately, dozens of burly pack members lunged out from behind her and formed a wall in front of her, blocking her escape and barring Dingo and Makero from getting close to her. The line of pack members stretched all the way around the space in front of Rock's terrifying den, leaving her trapped in the blood-soaked area in front of it.

Dingo and Makero skidded to a halt in front of the thick lines of pack members, letting out sharp gasps of alarm. More pack members slowly crept up to the blockade, leaving Saderia standing helplessly in the center of the circle of hundreds of pack members, trapped and blocked off from any rescuers. Saderia's heart sank with dread. Was this how she died?

Dingo let out a furious snarl and bared his fangs at the canines blocking his way. "Get away from her! Let her go right now!"

“Calm down, Dingo.”

The low, condescending voice that echoed out over the camp sent shivers racing down Saderia’s spine. Suppressing a shudder, she gazed up at the towering den with wide, horrified amber eyes as Rock began to speak.

The cruel dingo Leader let out a soft, patronizing chuckle and leered down at her canine friend. She could practically hear the sneer in his voice. “Don’t worry, Dingo. I’m not going to hurt the pretty Princess.”

Gasping for breath, Dingo gritted his teeth and glared up at him, his light brown eyes blazing with fury. “Enough, Rock! Let her go!”

Rock let out a cold snicker and condescendingly shook his head. “Poor Dingo. You’re not exactly in a position to make demands, are you? What are you going to do if I don’t let her go? Kill me like Bone? Oh, that’s right. You can’t get near me.” A wide, crooked sneer spread across his face. “But you and the forest King don’t need to fret. I’m not going to hurt the little tiger.” In one swift, smooth movement, he leapt off the right side of the platform onto one of the harsh spikes jutting out beneath it. Vaulting off the outcropping, he leapt from spike to spike until he landed neatly on the ground behind the wall of pack members guarding his den. At once, the crowd of enemy dingoes parted, letting Rock saunter past them with a cruel smirk on his face. Snickering to himself, the long-haired, dusty dark brown dingo stalked past the pack members and sauntered right up to Saderia with a wide, cruel grin. “I merely want to talk to her.”

Dingo bared his fangs and let out a dangerous growl, while Makero narrowed his eyes and dug his claws furiously into the sand. The rest of the wounded forest animals and outcasts gathered a few feet behind them on the edge of camp, watching the exchange with eyes full of wonder and fear. From their nervous but mesmerized gazes, it seemed as though they were watching a sacrifice.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia took a silent breath and met Rock’s dark brown gaze evenly, refusing to show even the slightest hint of fear. Even when the dingo Leader stood towering over her, she forced herself not to look away. Right before the cruel canine could open his mouth to speak, a furious snarl sounded from somewhere to the right. Blinking in shock, Saderia and Rock whipped around just in time to see Dash shoot out from the shadows of a den and leap over the heads of the surrounding pack members, his fur bristling with fury.

The dark lion landed neatly in the circle of pack members and bared his fangs in a dangerous snarl. "Leave her alone!"

Rock raised an eyebrow and chuckled in amusement. "Aw, who is this? Your boyfriend?"

Saderia shot him a furious glare and lashed her tail. All the while, her mind whirled with terror. What was Dash doing here? Couldn't he see they were outnumbered?

Dash stalked toward Rock and paused when he stood just a few paces away from him, his fur bristling with fury and his amber eyes blazing with hatred. "I said leave her alone."

Rock just snickered and shook his head in amusement. "All right, tough guy. I'll leave your little Princess girlfriend alone. Is it all right if I talk to her first?" His dark brown eyes glittered knowingly. "After all, I'm currently closer to her than you are, and I also have more friends around me than you do." A clear threat tinged his light words.

Dash narrowed his eyes in fury, but said nothing.

Rock chuckled to himself and turned away from him. "All right then." Gazing down at Saderia, he grinned a crooked sneer and coolly flicked his tail. "Well, Princess, would you like to tell me what this was all about? You and your forest animals just suddenly got the idea to come in here and attack my dingoes when I've never done anything to you? What was that all about, huh?"

Saderia coldly narrowed her eyes. "You hurt my friends."

"Ah, the outcast mutts." Rock snickered and condescendingly raised an eyebrow. "Clearly, you're unfamiliar with dingo ways if you feel sorry for them. They brought this fate on themselves with rebellion and plenty of other crimes. The only ones they should blame are themselves."

Saderia lashed her tail in fury. "It's not their fault they were punished for standing up for what they believe in. It's not their fault they had a cruel, disgusting dictator!"

"Ooh, I'm hurt, Princess," Rock jeered, pretending to wince.

Saderia gritted her teeth and drove her claws into the sand in fury. "Stop calling me that!" Frustration burned in her chest despite her situation. Why did all of her enemies have to call her 'Princess'? First Dastarius, then Lolista, and now this guy! How did he even know she was a Princess anyway? A jolt of shock shot through her the instant the thought flashed

through her mind. Her eyes opened wide in alarm and a sudden, dark sense of dread rose in her chest, making her entire body feel cold. How *did* he know?

Swallowing back a wave of fear, Saderia narrowed her eyes and stalked right up to Rock until she stood right in front of him, her fur bristling and her eyes blazing. “How do you know I’m the forest’s Princess? And why are you laughing so much?”

Rock broke out in a wild, grisly sneer. “Clearly, you like to cut to the chase, Princess. I like that in food.” The dingo Leader stalked closer to her until they stood eye to eye. His dark brown irises leered right into hers and a cruel sneer curled up the corners of his mouth. His filthy yellow fangs were flecked with blood. Even with his hot, blood-scented breath on her face, Saderia didn’t once flinch away and met his gaze unwaveringly. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of looking away.

Rock’s sneer seemed to grow even wider. “You obviously have a lot of courage, Princess.” Flicking his tail coolly, he chuckled, then turned and trailed carelessly back toward his den, his voice light and taunting. “A lot more than your mother, that is.”

Saderia froze. Dash froze. Near the outer wall of pack members, Dingo and Makero froze. Every forest animal alive seemed to freeze in shock. Nobody moved or said a word. Tense silence swept over the entire camp.

Rock paced a few steps away from her, then calmly sat down a few feet away, turning his back to her and keeping his eyes on the pack members guarding his den. His tail twitched lightly back and forth and a smirk tugged at the corners of his mouth. Saderia’s eyes widened and she stared at him in shock, her mouth gaping open in horror. Her heart froze in her chest. The silence around her was so thick, all she could hear was the harsh, ragged breaths of the pack members.

A dark sense of understanding slowly crept into her stunned amber eyes. New strength flowed into her limbs and a raging fire swept into her heart, making it pound wildly in her chest. Gritting her teeth, she stumbled toward Rock and let out a loud cry of fury. “What did you do to my Mom?”

Instantly, a horde of pack members stalked toward her from every direction to apprehend her. All of them froze in place when Rock held up a paw to stop them. Ignoring them, Saderia raced toward Rock with blazing

amber eyes, wanting nothing more than to pin him down and kill him. Just as she loomed up behind him, though, Rock whirled around and sent her staggering to the ground with one smooth, powerful smack of his paw.

Hissing furiously, Saderia struggled to catch herself, but her paws slipped on the bloody sand and she crumpled helplessly to the ground. Shaking herself, she looked up with blazing eyes as a shadow loomed over her and found herself staring up into Rock's sneering face. Her entire body shook with rage and horror. "How do you know my mother?" she whispered, her voice hoarse and soft with fury. "What did you do to her?"

Rock snickered and leaned down close to her face to whisper in her ear. "Relax, Princess, she's alive." Sneering down at her, he flicked his tail back toward his den and chuckled at her cold expression. "She's being kept prisoner in a den just below *my* perfect den, a den that's guarded every minute of every day."

Saderia's breath caught in her throat and her eyes narrowed to slits. "What did you do?"

Rock shrugged in mock innocence. "I only asked her a few questions." He paused, then let a sneer creep across his dust-colored face. "And she told me a lot."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. One of her previous Dreams flashed through her mind like a lightning bolt, leaving her feeling numb. In one of her nightmares, she had seen a shadowy figure interrogating her mother in some dark, eerie prison. The figure had been Rock. Karenisha had been his prisoner all along! Rage and desperation glowed in her eyes. What now?

Gritting her teeth, she staggered to her paws and faced Rock with a burning glare, her legs practically shaking with rage. "Give her back."

Rock sneered and simply shook his head with a cold, mocking grin.

White hot rage flashed through Saderia's blood like a rush of molten lava. With blazing amber eyes, she bared her fangs and let out a deafening roar that echoed out over the entire camp. "***Give her back now!***"

Rock didn't even flinch at her harsh snarl. A cold, condescending gleam lit up his eyes and he stepped toward her with an infuriatingly calm flick of his tail. "How about this, Princess? I'll give her back to you...on one condition."

Hatred flared in her eyes. Before she realized what she was doing, she let out a furious snarl and lunged toward Rock with her bloody claws outstretched. Behind her, Dash let out a shout of alarm and rushed to stop her, but never got a chance. Two of Rock's followers lunged toward her the instant she sprang and tackled her to the ground before she could lay a paw on Rock. Both dingoes slammed her down on the sandy earth and held her down by pinning all four of her legs to the ground with strong, heavy paws. No matter how hard she struggled, the dingoes kept her pinned, pressing down on her rougher and rougher with every desperate movement she made. A crowd of Rock's pack members grabbed Dash and held him back when he tried to race toward her to free her.

Rage and loathing burned in Saderia's eyes and a furious hiss tore out of her throat when she saw Rock loom over her. "You mutt! You worthless, disgusting, pathetic little mutt!"

Rock didn't wince. The dingo Leader simply flicked his tail and smirked. "Say whatever you want, Princess, but insults aren't going to get your mother back."

A bitter growl rumbled in her throat, but she remained silent, waiting to hear his so-called proposal.

Rock sneered and leaned down close to her to press his filthy muzzle close to her ear. His voice was so quiet, he sounded like a hissing snake. "I'll make you a deal, Princess, since you're such a brave, pretty little piece of food. I'll give you your mommy back if you give me your forest."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror and her heart skipped a beat.

A low snicker escaped Rock's throat and his smirk grew wider at her stunned expression. "I want full control of every inch of the forest, so that I can rule the forest in addition to the desert. I want to be the forest's King as well as the desert's Leader. I want full control of *everything*. If you hand the forest over to me to control, I'll let you have your weak, halfwit mother back *and* I'll let you and your friends live. I'll even let Dingo live, though he'll still have to pay for his crimes somehow."

A grisly, triumphant sneer twisted his scarred muzzle as he pulled away from her and leered down at her. His smile only grew colder at the sight of her horrified expression. "I'll give you a week to make your decision, Princess. Until then, you and your troops are free to leave. I'll

even let you collect your dead, so you can give them a proper funeral. After you've cleaned up all the bodies, you'll be killed on sight should you set one foot in my camp. At the end of the week, you will send just one animal from your forest to give me your answer to my proposition. Only then will one of you be allowed to come into my camp safely so that I can hear your response. If your answer is yes, great. If it's no, we'll attack you and kill every last animal in your pathetic forest. Got it?"

Saderia stared up at him with wide, horrified amber eyes. An overwhelming sense of dread washed over her, making her heart sink and her entire body feel cold with helplessness and defeat. Rage still kindled in her heart, but hopelessness seemed to wear her down and extinguish the flame. After several moments of silence, all she could do was nod.

"Good. I'm glad you understand." Rock snickered at her, then glanced at the two canines holding her down and flicked his tail to signal for them to let her go.

Saderia staggered to her paws the instant the pack members let her up, letting out a shaky breath and glaring at Rock with burning amber eyes. The dingo Leader simply laughed and gestured for the pack members blocking her exit to step aside and let her through. Every pack member in the camp seemed to snicker along with their dark Leader, filling the entire camp with a raucous chorus of cold, mocking laughter.

Gritting her teeth, Saderia whipped around to stalk back toward her army, feeling her fur bristle with rage and humiliation. Just before she started to walk away, Rock let out a dark, jeering laugh.

"Which is more important, Princess? Your mother or your power?"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Plan

Shadows danced across the wooden stage at the front of the clearing. Darkness covered the silent forest, hiding the woods in blackness. Dark clouds covered the moon in the black sky, blocking out the silver light. A darker cloud of dread and helplessness extinguished all the light in Saderia's eyes. With fur sticking out in thick clumps of dried blood, Saderia stood in the darkness covering the stage, her eyes shadowed with pain.

On the edge of the stage sat her father. Only he was no longer the strong King he had been just the day before. The weary tiger sat hunched over the stage, his head down, his messy fur drenched with blood, and his body covered in scars. Hopelessness shadowed his dull green eyes. Beside Saderia sat Dash, looking as horrible as her. Dried blood coated his dark brown fur and grisly wounds lined his sides. His bloody dark mane hung messily over his eyes. A shadow covered his face and he kept his gaze locked on his scarred paws. When Saderia tapped him to see if he was all right, he didn't even look at her. A heavy sigh escaped her throat.

Rock had her mother. The thought sent fiery rage and cold helplessness racing through her at the same time. Her shoulders slumped in defeat. The bloody gashes lining her sides seemed to sting every time the thought crossed her mind. Dried blood made her fur stick up in grotesque angles and her legs shook with exhaustion. Stars twinkled high in the sky. Hours had passed since they had been defeated, but the kingdom had only now returned to the forest. Every hour before had been spent collecting their dead from Rock's camp.

The taunting laughter of the pack members still rang in her ears. While the forest animals with the worst wounds had been sent home, those who were still strong had helped bring back the dead for funerals. The royal family had attended every funeral. All of them seemed to blend together into one miserable event. Saderia couldn't remember how many times she had spoken of the great deeds done by those who had died in battle. Her

throat felt raw and her heart weak after so many speeches made to crying families.

Dozens of forest animals sat around the clearing, whispering anxiously to each other. Most of the army sat in the clearing, but those who had been gravely wounded had been sent to the healers away from the meeting place. None of the dingoes sat in the clearing. All of the outcasts were somewhere in the desert, holding proper funerals for their dead.

While the outcasts had dragged their dead away from Rock's camp, Dingo and Thunder had decided it would be best to bury the deceased in their own home. The outcasts had brought their dead to a place close to the forest to hold their funerals. During her trips back and forth to bring back her own dead fighters, Saderia had caught a few glimpses of the funerals. Unlike many dingo traditions, it was actually kind of a sweet, humane ritual.

On one of her trips, she had asked Dingo about the ritual. According to him, in a typical dingo funeral, the dead animal was laid in the center of camp, while the pack gathered around the body. Without a camp or a pack and with dozens dead, Dingo and Thunder had had to improvise. The two had laid all the dead canines on the sand and called for every outcast to gather around. In a typical funeral, every dingo stepped forward, one by one, to pay their last respects. Those closest to the dead stepped up last. As soon as everyone had their say, the Leader was supposed to say a few words. Apparently, Dingo had had to step in to act as Leader for every funeral. After the Leader had spoken, the dingo closest to the dead would howl. The Leader would echo the cry, then every canine in the pack would do the same. Never before had Saderia heard howls louder than those she had heard on her last trip back to the forest.

Shaking out of her thoughts, Saderia felt a shiver creep down her spine. During her trips back and forth, she had barely gotten to talk to Dingo, but she hadn't been able to speak to Dash or Jeb either, even though both of them had been right by her side. Her thoughts had been too focused on her mother. What would Rock do to her if she didn't hand over the forest? And how could she possibly save both her forest and her mother?

Sacrificing her forest to Rock was out of the question. But she couldn't sacrifice her mother either. The thought of attacking Rock again flitted through her mind, but a sense of helplessness followed. Rock had

only given her a week to give him an answer. If she was to start another battle, it would have to be in that time. But with only a week to prepare and an army too weak to stand, she would have no hope of winning. Even if she could whip up a suitable army in time, how could she attack knowing that at any moment, Rock could kill her mother? Her heart sank. Was there no way to save her mother *and* the forest?

Her mind reeled with helplessness. There had to be *some* way to save everyone... but she just couldn't think. Her mind simply refused to work. Frustration boiled in her chest. Why couldn't she think? Why couldn't she come up with a solution? Why did she feel so *useless*? Heaving a sigh, she shook her thoughts away and glanced up at her father. From the way he slumped over the stage, she could tell he had no ideas either. Dash's shadowed gaze told her the same thing. No one seemed to have any ideas. So what now?

The sound of paws crashing through undergrowth shattered her thoughts, making her look up at the edge of the clearing in surprise. Outcasts suddenly poured out of the shadowy woods into the clearing, murmuring anxiously to themselves and struggling to stand. Dingo walked at the head of the crowd. As the dingoes started to spread out into the clearing, he bounded toward the stage and leapt up in front of his two friends, a grave expression on his scarred face.

Catching Saderia's gaze, he sat down beside her and Dash and studied her closely, his light brown eyes shadowed with grimness. "Any ideas on what we're going to do?"

Saderia heaved a sigh, trying not to flinch at Dingo's bloody appearance. Grisly scars lined every inch of his body and dried blood clung to every patch of his shaggy fur. Gore stuck to his fangs. One of his ears looked like it had been through a shredder.

"No," she muttered, her voice soft and hoarse with defeat. A wave of pain and defeat rose in her throat, making it hard to breathe. "What *can* we do? He has my Mom."

Dash's eyes glimmered with pain and sympathy. The dark lion looked up and started to say something, but was cut off by Dingo before he could speak.

Not noticing him, the canine rested his paw gently on her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Saderia. We'll think of something. Maybe your Dreams will

help. Or maybe Claw will.”

Saderia let out a weary sigh. “Yeah, maybe...I guess my Dreams or Claw might help...”

Or Dastarius. Dash silently added the words in his head and turned away, his eyes narrowing in thought. The thought of his father waiting for him in the dream clearing flickered through his mind, making his heart skip with impatience. All he wanted to do was end the forest meeting and go home, so he could fall asleep and meet with the dark lion. Considering Saderia, Dingo, and Makero were all clueless, his only hope was Dastarius. His father had better have a back-up plan like he promised. Otherwise, they were in trouble.

Saderia sighed, drawing Dash out of his dark thoughts. “Maybe you’re right...But what do we tell them?” Flicking her tail, she gestured to the anxious animals spread out before the stage.

Dingo shrugged. “Why not the truth? We were given a week to think about it, Saderia, so let’s just tell them that all the leaders need a day or two to come up with a decent strategy. Until then, everyone should rest and regain their strength.”

Saderia blinked several times. “Good idea.” She paused, then shook her head and let out a sigh. “I guess I’m just not thinking clearly. This whole thing is just...awful.”

Dingo sighed sympathetically. “Do you want me to speak to the dingoes first?”

Saderia shook her head bleakly and took a deep breath. “No, I’ll go first. I’ll tell them.” She hesitated, then glanced at Dash and flicked him lightly with her tail, making him look up in surprise. “Come on, Dash,” she murmured, nodding to the edge of the stage. “We have a job to do.”

Dash nodded grimly and followed when she stepped up to the edge of the stage. Side by side, they sat on the stage and gazed out at the crowds of wounded animals. Beside them, Makero looked up wearily, but made no move to stop them or speak in their place. If anything, the King seemed grateful that they were taking charge when he had no idea what to do.

Taking a deep breath, Dash let out a loud roar, silencing everyone in the clearing. All eyes turned to the stage, glowing with fear. When all eyes locked on her, Saderia took a deep breath. Keeping her voice calm and facing the crowd steadily, she started to speak. “As you know, Rock has my

mother, Queen Karenisha.” Her voice rang out through the clearing, stronger than she felt. “Rock has given us a week to decide what to do...”

She took a deep breath and forced herself to face the crowd steadily. “Rock thinks he’s won. For that reason, I think we can trust him to leave us alone for the week. But make no mistake, Rock has not won. Not yet. During this week, we must regain our strength. We *will* find a way to stand up to Rock. We will never allow a dictator like him to take over our land!” Her eyes glowed with determination. “The forest is strong, and so are our allies. Over the next few days, my family and I will talk with the outcasts’ Leaders to come up with a strategy to fight Rock. Until we decide on a strategy to get rid of him once and for all, you must be strong. For your forest, for your kingdom, for your allies, and for Queen Karenisha!”

A few shouts of hope rang out as soon as she finished speaking. The helplessness vanished from the eyes of most of the forest animals and a tense sense of calm spread through the meeting place. Several animals murmured a few quiet words to each other, but no one resisted or challenged her words. At that point, most of them were probably too tired to fight.

While the forest animals whispered, Dingo stalked to the edge of the stage and gazed at the outcasts with blazing brown eyes. “Thunder and I agree with everything Princess Saderia has said. I will help them think of a strategy to beat Rock. Until that strategy is finalized, all of you get some rest to recover your strength. Those who are wounded, please see the forest healers to heal your wounds—do not be so proud as to refuse help. Those who are in decent shape, you can practice fighting tomorrow. Tonight, get some rest.”

All the outcasts nodded at his words and slowly began to spread out in the clearing to find a place to sleep. Murmuring to each other, the forest animals wearily began to stumble toward the woods to return to their homes. A sense of hope and anticipation gleamed in their eyes.

Dingo heaved a sigh and turned to face Saderia and Dash on the edge of the stage. His light brown eyes were clouded with weariness. “What do you guys want to do now? If you want to start planning, that’s fine. But I have to admit, I’m exhausted.”

Saderia’s eyes darkened with tiredness and sympathy. “I am, too.”

Dash flicked his tail and smiled weakly. "How about we all just go home and get some rest? Saderia and I could go home, while you stay here to look after the outcasts, Dingo. The next morning, we could all meet here at the break of dawn to start planning."

Saderia managed a weak smile. "That sounds like a good idea. We do need to get home to sleep. Plus, we need to wash all this blood out of our fur. You too," she added, flicking Dingo lightly and trying not to wince at the blood soaking nearly every inch of his fur.

Dingo blinked several times, then glanced down at his sticky, gore-spattered fur in surprise. "Oh...yeah, I guess that would be a good idea. I forgot about that."

Saderia raised an eyebrow. "How could you forget you were covered in blood?"

"You grow up in the pack, you get used to it," Dingo muttered, a shadow crossing his face. With a dark gaze, he slowly started to pad away, his tail twitching behind him.

Saderia heaved a sigh and glanced tiredly up at her father. "Dad? Can we...go home now?"

Makero let out a heavy sigh. "Yes, let's go home and forget this mess. Lead the way, Saderia."

Sleep crashed over Saderia the instant she laid her head on her pillow. Seconds later, her eyes fluttered open into an eerie scene. Sand dunes rose up around her, taking shape out of the darkness. An eerie blue glow shrouded the barren land and the starless sky. A jolt of hope shot through Saderia the second the ghostly scene swam into focus. Instantly, she whirled around to search for her spirit guide and froze when she spotted a glowing light brown dingo sitting just a few paces behind her. A grave expression shadowed Claw's face.

Saderia's heart skipped a beat and she instantly stepped up to the ghostly dingo, facing her with wide, desperate amber eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Claw bowed her head and let out a long, regretful sigh. "I'm sorry."

Saderia let out a heavy breath and forced herself to sit back as calmly as possible. Her mind whirled with confusion and betrayal. Why *hadn't* Claw told her Rock had Karenisha? She must have known. No, she

had known. Every time they had met, the spirit had hinted at it even though she had never outright told her. Blinking rapidly, she gazed up at Claw with wide, pained amber eyes. “Why? Why didn’t you tell me Rock had my Mom?”

Claw took a deep breath and slowly looked up, her light brown eyes dull and weary. “I told you a long time ago that my job *isn’t* to be your friend. My job is to save you. I wanted to tell you, Saderia. There wasn’t a moment when I didn’t want to tell you. But I couldn’t.”

Saderia’s eyes clouded with confusion. “But why?”

Claw narrowed her eyes and studied her gravely, not saying a word. After a long silence, she took a deep breath and darkly met Saderia’s gaze, her eyes glinting in the dim light. “First, tell me what you would have done if I *had* told you Rock had Karenisha.”

Saderia frowned in misunderstanding. “I would have made a plan to save her...”

“Exactly.” Claw’s eyes flashed grimly in the darkness of the spirit realm.

Saderia lashed her tail in indignation. “I would have saved her. I would have brought her away from that horrible place. Then Rock would have never known anything about the forest, he would have never made a plan, and we would never have had to fight that war. If I had saved her from the beginning, all those animals wouldn’t have died.”

Claw flinched and looked away, her eyes gleaming with pain. Saderia bit her lip and looked down, knowing she had gone too far. The light spirit took a deep breath and faced her with dull, weary eyes. Her voice came out as a soft whisper. “And just how would you have done all that? How could you have possibly saved your mother from Rock?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know. I would have found some way, though! I have you and Dreams and Dash and all my friends...I could have found a way.”

A dark shadow crossed her face. “No, you couldn’t. Saderia, I’ve been watching your mother for weeks. I’ve looked at her situation from every angle imaginable to try to find *some* way to free her. Trust me, that’s *all* I’ve been doing for the past few weeks. But no matter which way I looked at it, I could tell it was impossible for you to have saved her.” When Saderia tried to protest, Claw sternly held up a paw. “From the moment

Rock captured her, she has been guarded day and night. Her prison is directly below Rock's den—the place where all the toughest dingoes are housed. Guards surrounded her prison every minute of every day. Never once was there a lull in her protection. There was no possible way you could have gotten into that camp, fought off that many dingoes, and returned to the forest with your mother. You wouldn't have even made it to her prison."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and longed to protest, but in the back of her mind, she knew Claw was right. Even if she didn't want to admit it, Claw had a point, and even if she hated it...Claw had done the right thing. The only reason Claw had kept the truth from her had been to protect her. What *would* have happened if she had tried to sneak her mother out of Rock's camp? A shiver raced down her spine at the gruesome thought. In the end, Claw *was* right...but still, the constant fear for her mother had nearly driven Saderia crazy. All those weeks of wondering where she was and if she was okay...and Claw had known all along.

Silence hung over them. Slowly, Saderia lifted her head, her eyes shadowed with pain. "They tortured her. I saw it in a Dream. She was being questioned by her captor. At the time, my Dream didn't show me who he was, but now I know it was Rock."

Claw let out a heavy sigh. Another silence swept over them. After a long moment, she took a deep breath, a shadow creeping over her face. "They broke her front legs."

Fiery rage and icy horror shot through Saderia, making her blood boil and freeze at the same time. Horrible understanding washed over her. "So she couldn't escape..."

Claw nodded darkly, her eyes clouded with pain. "That's another reason why you couldn't have saved her. Even if you had made it to her prison, you couldn't have gotten her out. She can't walk. And you and your friends wouldn't have been enough to carry her out while hundreds of dingoes attacked you from every direction. It was impossible."

Saderia closed her eyes and heaved a long sigh, knowing she was right.

Claw let out a quiet breath. "The only way you can save her is by fighting this war. If you kill Rock, his followers won't know what to do. They'll probably run away, or else you'll be able to fend them off while you

and your friends find Karenisha. The only way you'll ever get a chance to save your mother is if Rock's dead, and you know it, Saderia."

Saderia let out a heavy sigh. "I guess you're right." She paused, then narrowed her eyes and gazed at Claw in confusion. "I understand why you couldn't tell me anything to begin with. But why didn't you tell me Rock had her that night before I went into battle?"

Claw shrugged. "I thought about it, but you already had a lot on your mind. That little revelation would have distracted you. I wasn't sure if you would be able to lead the army if you were focused on saving your mother. Besides, I was worried you would get reckless and end up getting killed. Did you notice how the fighting was thickest around Rock's den? That wasn't just because Rock had to be protected, but because their prisoner had to be protected, too. There were too many dingoes to fight, and if you had focused on saving Karenisha rather than killing Rock, you would have never gotten to her alive. You won't ever be able to get her out of that camp as long as Rock is still breathing."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and hesitated for a long moment, then let out a soft breath and hung her head. "You're right. I'm sorry...I'm just so worried about my Mom."

Claw's eyes gleamed with sympathy and she rested a ghostly paw gently on Saderia's shoulder. "It's okay, Saderia. Like I said, it's my job to be your guide more than your friend. I already know you'll probably hate me for some of the things I do."

Saderia managed a weak smile. "I understand, Claw. I don't hate you. But..." Her smile faltered. "We...we lost. Rock got to use his sick plan...What do we do now?"

A shadow crossed Claw's face. "That, I don't know...The only thing you can do is train your troops over the week and try to come up with an answer to Rock's 'proposal.' I know you would never sacrifice your mother, but I also know you can't sacrifice the forest." Claw's eyes clouded with dullness and hollowness. "Giving him control would destroy the peace of your forest and ruin its culture for years to come. If Rock takes over the forest, it will become just as cruel, sick, and bloodthirsty as the desert. I lived in that kind of culture and look what it did to me, Saderia. I can't imagine your forest becoming the same way."

Saderia shivered and looked away, her eyes darkening grimly in the dim light. “Even if I did hand over the forest, I doubt Rock would give my mother back anyway.”

“That, too.” Claw sighed wearily. “Actually, I’m certain he won’t give her back no matter what you do. But it’s not as if you’re in a place to call him out on his faulty deal.”

Saderia squeezed her eyes shut. “So I’m stuck. Really, really stuck.” Her eyes flew open and a wild light of desperation glowed in their amber depths. “Is there nothing I can do?”

Claw shook her head helplessly. “I don’t know, Saderia. I had hoped that you would be able to kill Rock before it came to this, but now I don’t know what to do.”

Saderia heaved a shaky sigh. “What are my options? Rock said I could either hand over the forest or sacrifice my mom, but what does that mean? What do you think he’ll *really* do?”

Claw bit her lip and frowned. Tense quiet hung over them. After a long pause, she narrowed her eyes in thought. “Your options are to sacrifice your mother to keep Rock from stealing your forest, or to sacrifice your forest to keep him from killing your mother. I think you should choose not to sacrifice your mom. Not just because it would be awful, but because it wouldn’t do any good. Even if you refused to hand over your forest, who’s to say Rock wouldn’t find another way to take over? Now that he knows about the forest, he wants it, and he won’t back down. He could use his forces to kill you. If he killed your family, he *could* take over.” A sigh escaped her throat. “The only option that would give you any hope of saving your forest *and* your mother would be to give Rock the forest.”

A shadow crossed Claw’s face. “I have no idea what Rock plans to do once he takes over, but I doubt he plans to give Karenisha back. However...I don’t think he’ll kill her. Rock’s not the sharpest spike on the cactus, but even he must know that would be stupid. The fact that he has Karenisha is what gives him power over you. She’s leverage. If he keeps her alive, he can use her to bend the kingdom to his will.” A deep frown crossed her face. “Of course, he might just kill you and your family so you won’t be a threat, but I doubt he’ll do that either. Killing the royal family to stop *you* from revolting would only cause the others to revolt. If he kills the only leaders the forest animals have ever known, they’ll get angry. He

won't want to deal with that. Instead, he'll most likely make an example out of you so the kingdom will obey him. That could be...painful, but not life-threatening."

Saderia frowned thoughtfully, her mind whirling. "After Rock takes over the forest, my friends and I could go into hiding," she murmured, absently tracing a pattern in the sand. "Or else we could go along with his orders and become his 'examples,' all the while plotting to overthrow him." Her eyes glowed with a bright sense of determination. "The only way to disband the pack is to kill their Leader, so if we could somehow get a shot at Rock, we could drive the other dingoes out of our forest and save my Mom."

Claw's eyes lit up with excitement and she nodded eagerly. "Exactly."

"That's the only way..." Saderia's voice came out as a quiet, distant whisper.

"I think so." Claw rested her paw on her shoulder and offered her a weak smile. "You've got a week to come up with a good plan. Talk with your family and friends about all the possible things that could happen when Rock takes over and come up with plans and back-up plans to look out for each other and get rid of Rock. That's about all you can do. Right now, your only option is to sit back and see what happens."

A frustrated groan escaped Dash's throat. With a sigh, he rolled onto his belly and buried his face in his pillow, trying desperately to force himself to sleep. The one thing he *needed* to do was visit Dastarius...but of course, the night he *had* to sleep, he couldn't. Apparently, his father didn't have the courtesy to drop in on him in the living world either. True, it was risky for him to appear in a place where Saderia might see him, but when there was no one around, was it too much to ask for Dastarius to come to him?

Dash sighed and rolled over to gaze dully up at the ceiling. Bloody memories of the battle flitted through his mind, making him wince. Shame burned in his chest at the thought of how ruthless he had been. Why had he acted so strangely in the battle? In the heat of war, the *only* thing he had cared about was getting to Rock and killing anyone in his way. Not protecting his friends, not saving the outcasts, just...murder. A shiver raced

through him. That wasn't like him. Why had he turned into such a bloodthirsty monster?

Letting out a soft breath, Dash turned over, trying desperately to push the thoughts away. No matter how hard he tried, though, his mind always returned to the battle. Guilt burned in his chest. Why had he been so concerned with killing Rock and taking the glory for himself? Why had he panicked at the end and run after Rock when Makero had called for retreat? Had he really thought he would be able to fight his way to Rock on his own? A shadow flitted across his face. No, he had only endangered Saderia and the others.

The dark lion buried his face into his pillow, letting out a low groan. There had to be some way to make up for all the stupid things he had done. Maybe if he could *just* get to sleep, Dastarius would tell him what to do and he would be able to save the forest. If he could just follow his father's plan, he could fix everything. Then no one would remember how strangely he had acted in the battle. Everyone would look up to him as a hero.

A faint smile crossed his face. Absently, he pulled the blanket up to his nose, feeling somehow comforted by the thought. A few minutes later, a deep sleep swept over him.

Shadowy woods and an eerie clearing swam into view when Dash's eyes fluttered open. Skeletal trees and cold grass took shape out of the darkness around him, forming the shadowed dream clearing. Dash opened his eyes in the center of the frosty clearing, his amber irises glowing in the faint light. Across from him, his father sat on the stiff grass, his tail curled calmly over his paws and his amber eyes gleaming knowingly.

The dark spirit raised an eyebrow as the clearing took shape around him. "You lost."

Dash lashed his tail in indignation. "We did the best we could. Rock's pack was stronger than we thought." He paused, then flattened his ears and let a twinge of desperation creep into his voice. "You said you had a back-up plan. Will it work?"

The corners of Dastarius's mouth curled up in an eerie sneer. Shaking his mane over his face and gazing down at him with glowing amber eyes, he let out a chuckle. Snickering to himself, he rested his tail coolly on Dash's shoulder. "My son...Of course it will."

“Saderia! Saderia, wake up!” The door to Saderia’s room flew open with a loud crack. Ignoring the sound, Dash raced into the room, his heart beating wildly in his chest. Dastarius’s master plan burned in his mind as he skidded to a halt in front of her shadowed blue bed.

In the last few hours of their meeting, his father had detailed every part of his plan. At the end, Dash had to admit it was one of the best plans he had ever heard. Unfortunately, it was also one of the riskiest plans he had ever heard. Even Dastarius had admitted that there was a good chance he might end up dead. Considering what was at stake, though, Dash was willing to accept the risk. The benefits were too great to ignore. If Dastarius’s plan *did* work, Karenisha would be free, the forest would be safe, and Rock would be dead.

“Saderia!” Dash instantly leapt his front paws up onto the bed to shake her frantically, his eyes wild with hope and excitement. “Wake up!”

Saderia’s eyes flew open with a gasp of surprise. Blinking rapidly, she wearily sat up, then glanced at him in shock, her eyes wide with disbelief. “D-Dash? What’s going on?”

A brilliant grin spread across his face. “I know what we can do to stop Rock!”

“*What?*” Saderia’s mouth gaped open in shock. “What...what is it?”

Dash took a deep breath and tried to act calm even though his heart was pounding with excitement. Eagerly flicking his tail, he faced her with glowing amber eyes. “First of all, I think we’re going to have to hand the forest over to Rock. I doubt he’ll keep his word and give Karenisha back to us, but I still think giving him the forest is our only option.”

A shadow crossed her face and she nodded grimly. “Yes, I thought so, too. Is that all?”

Dash shook his head and grinned. “No. Rock told us to send an animal to him in one week to give him our answer to his proposition. I think you should send me.” Instantly, Saderia tried to protest, but Dash held up a paw to stop her. “Let me finish. I think I should be the one to go for good reason. First of all, the one who goes to Rock should be of some importance in the forest, so it should be one of us. Maybe I’m not ‘actual’ royalty like you and Makero, but I’m close enough, so he’ll take me seriously. More importantly, though, I want to be the one to go because I want to talk to

Rock.” With glowing eyes, he launched into a description of ‘his’ plan. Speaking in an eager voice, he explained the details his father had explained to him moments before—leaving out the few parts Dastarius had asked him to keep quiet about. With every word, Saderia’s eyes grew wider.

“That’s a good plan,” she breathed when he finally finished. Her eyes were round with awe and wonder. Frowning, she shook herself and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “But only in theory. How could it possibly work? How could you get Rock to do *that*?”

Dash just grinned and laughed. “Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“Dad!” Saderia bounded across the sleek wooden floor of the front room and skidded to a halt in the archway leading into the dining room. Golden sunlight streamed in through the windows behind her, lighting up her fur and shining in her glowing amber eyes. Dash instantly rushed after her and paused behind her, a knowing grin on his face.

Makero sat in one of the chairs at the gold dining table, while Cia and Uncle Jash sat on the opposite side. All three tigers looked up sharply at their sudden appearance, their eyes wide with surprise. Alarm gleamed in the King’s weary green eyes and he instantly leapt off his chair, his fur bristling with worry. “What is it? Has something happened?”

Saderia quickly shook her head, her tail lashing wildly back and forth with excitement. “No, Dad. Dash just came up with a great plan to stop Rock!”

Makero blinked in shock, then gaped at them in incredulity. “What? Really?”

“Yes!” A brilliant grin crossed Saderia’s face and her eyes gleamed with excitement. “Call a forest meeting now! We have to tell everyone as soon as possible!”

Dozens of forest animals gathered in the clearing, murmuring curiously to each other and gazing up at the stage. Every animal in the forest sat in the meeting place, speaking with some of the wounded army members. Outcasts covered the sparse grass, as well, whispering anxiously to each other and casting wondering glances at the wooden platform. Sunlight shone down through the canopy, dappling the ground with brilliant

light. The quiet murmur of conversation was the only sound in the quiet, dew-scented clearing.

Dash stood on the edge of the stage, his eyes glowing and his tail flicking eagerly. A proud, knowing expression covered his face and he held his head high as he faced the crowd. Saderia stood close beside him, staring out at the crowd with shining amber eyes. Her father sat a few paces behind them near the middle of the stage.

A sudden movement in the crowd caught Saderia's eye. The large group of outcasts on the right side of the clearing parted to let Dingo step past them. The scarred canine looked up and bounded onto the stage in front of Saderia and Dash, his light brown eyes glowing with curiosity.

When the two turned to him, he flicked his tail and raised an eyebrow. "What's going on? I thought we were going to talk it over before we said anything to the others."

Saderia's ears flicked in embarrassment and she gave him a sheepish shrug. "Sorry, Dingo. But Dash came up with a great idea, and I think his plan could work. We wanted to tell the forest as soon as possible, so they wouldn't have to worry anymore."

Dingo's eyes widened in surprise and he raised an eyebrow. "He came up with a plan just last night? Jeez...You guys don't tell me anything anymore!"

Saderia rolled her eyes and grinned. "Sorry, it was kind of last minute. Anyway, you'll understand soon. You can stay up here on the stage if you want."

Dingo shrugged and sat back beside them. "Okay. Let's hear your great plan, Dash."

Dash just rolled his eyes at him and let a smile creep across his face. Flicking Dingo with his tail, he stood proudly on the edge of the stage and let out a loud roar. Instantly, the voices of the crowd died away. Every eye turned to the stage until the entire crowd gazed up at him, their eyes wide with curiosity. Thick silence hung in the air.

Determination gleamed in Dash's eyes and he held his head high to show them they had no reason to fear. Resolution shone on his face. If he could get the crowd to accept his plan, the war would soon be won. "Dingoes and forest animals...yesterday, Rock gave us a proposition that worried us all. He revealed that he had been holding Queen Karenisha

captive and gave us a choice—either we give him the forest or sacrifice the Queen.” His eyes glowed with determination. “This morning, the royal family came to a decision. We now have a plan. In one week’s time, *I* will travel to Rock’s camp to give him the forest’s answer. I will tell him that we will give him control of the forest.”

Hushed whispers broke out the instant the words left his mouth. Anxious murmurs and fearful voices echoed around the clearing. Forest animals shifted nervously and glanced around at their neighbors, while the outcasts muttered anxiously to each other.

Dash’s eyes glowed knowingly. “I assure you, this will only be temporary. It is the only way we can guarantee the safety of the Queen. When Rock takes over, the royal family will go into hiding, but it is all part of the plan. In order to destroy Rock, we must first give him what he wants. When he thinks he’s won, that’s when we’ll ruin him. While the royal family hides here, I will be in the desert with Rock.” An eerie gleam lit up his amber eyes. “Because when I go to give Rock our answer, I’m going to give him a deal of my own.”

With shining eyes, Dash explained the plan, leaving out a few details. All the crowd needed to know were the basics. Later, he would go over the finer details with his friends to make sure they understand their roles. At the end of his speech, he gazed out at the hopeful crowd with a determined grin. “I believe I can make this plan work. In time, we will win back the forest and the Queen. All you have to do is trust your leaders. We will win this war through whatever means necessary. We will earn our Queen and our freedom back!”

Hope glowed in the forest animals’ eyes. Eager whispers spread through the crowd as animals turned thoughtfully to their neighbors. Some forest animals started to wander off, while others lingered. A few outcasts murmured curiously to each other and padded over to speak to the forest animals. With a faint smile, Dash flicked Saderia with his tail, then leapt off the stage and landed neatly on the grass. His two friends bounded after him and crowded around the platform. All three looked to the crowd at the sound of rapid paw steps and saw Jeb weave through the animals, his eyes wide with shock.

The tiny creature skidded to a halt in front of his friends, his eyes wide with amazement. “You’re really going to go to the desert and talk to

Rock yourself?”

A determined grin crossed Dash’s face. “Yep. It shouldn’t be too hard.”

Saderia shot him a stern look and flicked him firmly with her tail. “Don’t get cocky.”

Dash’s gaze softened and he gave her a weak smile. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

Dingo nodded thoughtfully, his light brown eyes absent. Gazing at the crowds of outcasts gathered around the clearing, he cast a quick glance at his friends, then turned to pad away, his tail twitching lightly back and forth. “I’m going to go talk to Thunder about this,” he called, raising his tail in goodbye.

Saderia nodded and followed him with her eyes until he disappeared behind a crowd of curious outcasts. Silence fell over her and her two friends. Absently, the three of them gazed out at the wide clearing. Dingoes and forest animals covered nearly every part of the clearing, but this time, the outcasts didn’t seem confined to just one side. All around the clearing, dingoes and forest animals met and talked in eager, friendly voices. Some wounded canines and forest animals lingered near the wild edges of the clearing, sharing somber stories of the war. Others laughed over a joke, while a few huddled together to discuss the latest turn of events. Some even gathered in groups, as if they were old friends.

Saderia’s eyes scanned the clearing for familiar faces. Dingo’s older brother, Rip, pranced across the clearing with an unfamiliar forest animal, laughing and acting like a playful pup. She raised an eyebrow and grinned. “And that of the dingo who thinks of us as food.”

Dash grinned and snickered. “Yeah...This war has changed a lot.”

Saderia nodded seriously and turned back to the crowd, letting her eyes flick from animal to animal. Dingo’s other brother, Tear, sat near the back edge of the clearing with a few forest animals, smiling and eagerly flicking his tail. Other familiar faces stood out around the clearing. Loki hung around the left edge of the meeting place next to a scarred cheetah. Relief glowed in the cheetah/leopard’s bright green eyes. When Saderia looked closer, she realized the cheetah beside her friend was one of her own army members—Loki’s father.

Smiling faintly, Saderia tore her eyes off the cheetahs and gazed out at the huge crowds. Even shy Lisa sat a few paces away with a group of dingoes, talking with a smile on her face. On the other side of the clearing, Maeta padded across the grass after her niece, Tawny. A warm smile covered her face. An even brighter, excited grin spread across Tawny's face as the tiny leopard cub bounded proudly through the clearing.

A second later, the pitch black pup, Bunny, darted over to Tawny and tapped her on the shoulder, letting out an excited squeal. "You're it, Tawny!" Tawny squealed in delight and instantly chased after Bunny when the pup darted away, laughing and grinning. The two young animals bounded through the crowd, weaving in between the legs of other animals. A moment later, Bunny's older brother, Lightning, stepped up beside Maeta and shook his head warmly. Side by side, they watched the small animals race around the clearing.

Saderia's eyes glowed with warmth. "This war has changed everything. Now the forest animals and the dingoes are getting along. Probably for the first time in centuries."

Dash nodded absently, his eyes clouded. "I know...It is pretty amazing."

Saderia smiled, then pricked her ears at the sound of a familiar voice.

"I'm back!" Dingo bounded away from a crowd of outcasts and skidded to a halt in front of them, his light brown eyes glowing in the faint light. "Miss me?"

Saderia chuckled and grinned. "Hi, Dingo. Short meeting?"

Dingo flicked his tail and shrugged. "Yeah, I talked to Thunder, but he said whatever I decide to do is fine with him. I guess he wants me to take over for now." He heaved a sigh, his gaze sympathetic. "He doesn't really want to be the outcasts' Leader anymore...Oh well. He'll probably feel better after the war is over. Things will be more peaceful then." He paused, then glanced at his friends with a grin. "So do any of you need anything at the moment? Anything I should do now to help out with your genius plan?"

Saderia's whiskers twitched in amusement. "No, I can't think of anything."

"Me neither," Jeb replied, giving him a faint smile.

Dash narrowed his eyes in thought. “Actually, I do need something from you, Dingo.” A knowing gleam lit up his amber eyes as he met his friend’s surprised gaze. “I need you to teach me how to hunt in the desert. I need you to teach me how to navigate it and anything else I might need to survive out there.” A wry smile curled up the corners of his mouth. “After all, I should probably know more about the desert if I’m going to rule it.”

Chapter Thirty

Mind Games

Searing hot sunlight streamed down on Dash's fur, burning his eyes and lighting up his dark brown mane. Miles of barren sand dunes stretched out in front of him as far as the eye could see. Tall trees rose up behind him, reaching out over him with a lush canopy of leaves as one last offer of shelter. The dark lion sat on the very edge of the forest, letting grass curl over his back paws and hot desert sand sting his front paws. His three friends sat around him, gazing out at the desert with clouded eyes and grave expressions.

Dash's mind whirled as he gazed out at the hot sand, trying to calm his pounding heart. For the entire walk to the edge of the forest, he had reviewed Dastarius's plan over and over again, memorizing every aspect of it. After all, his life could very well depend on the tiniest details. Still, he couldn't help but fear he might get something wrong. The slightest mistake would mean his death...A shiver raced through him and he tried to bite back his unease. Part of him wanted to think that he could fight his way out of Rock's camp with Dastarius's help, but with hundreds of brutal pack members, the task was impossible. The thought of traveling miles to Rock's camp, going into a place crawling with bloodthirsty dogs, and confronting Rock with his 'deal' was nothing short of nerve-wracking.

Still, he forced himself to show no fear and shook the thoughts away. If he were to have any hope of getting Rock to play into his plan, he would have to be strong. More than anything, he had to be convincing. Convincing enough to fool even Saderia.

Beside him, Saderia heaved a long sigh, drawing him out of his thoughts. With a shadowed gaze, she rested her tail on his shoulder. "Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Dash gave her a weak smile and nodded. "Of course, Saderia. I'll be fine."

“I still can’t believe you’re doing this.” On Dash’s other side, Jeb shivered and gazed out at the desert with terrified blue/green eyes. “I can’t believe you’re going out there all alone.”

On Saderia’s other side, Dingo simply flicked his tail and glanced at Dash with only mild concern in his light brown eyes. “Speaking of which, are you sure you don’t want me to guide you?”

Dash heaved a sigh and nodded. “I’m sure. I’ll be fine, Dingo. Rock specifically said to only send one animal. It would just look suspicious if you came with me.” The dark lion raised an eyebrow. “Besides, he kind of hates you, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Dingo snickered under his breath. “Yeah, I noticed. I guess I’m going to be his first target when he takes over, huh? Guess I’ll have to be incognito for a while.”

Saderia frowned worriedly. “You don’t think he’s going to kill you, do you?”

“No, he’s not going to kill me.” Dingo heaved a weary sigh. “He would much prefer to torture me first.” He cracked a humorless smile and shook his head. “What fun.”

Concern glowed in Saderia’s eyes. “Dingo, do you really think it will be that bad? We can find some way to protect you or something...”

“No, don’t bother.” Dingo held up a paw and gave her a weak smile. “It’s not that bad, Saderia. Dingoes tortured me all the time back in the pack and I lived. I’ll be fine. Worry about the revolution...not to mention, yourself. Rock’s got it out for you, too, and even though he might go a bit easier on you, I somehow doubt he’s going to be merciful.”

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s okay. I can deal with that.”

Dash’s eyes narrowed with concern. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” Saderia paused, then gazed out at the desert and heaved a weary sigh. “Anyway...I guess it’s time for you to go, huh?”

Dash’s eyes clouded as he gazed out at the desert, but he nodded seriously. “Yeah...Take care of yourselves while I’m gone. I’ll get word to you as soon as possible, if I can.”

“All right.” Saderia paused, then pressed up against him and let out a soft sigh. “Goodbye for now, Dash.” Giving him a long, lingering glance,

she stepped back with Dingo and Jeb and watched him with dark amber eyes clouded with worry.

Dash's gaze softened with sympathy. "Goodbye, Saderia." Pressing his cheek against hers, he gave her a weak smile, then turned and stared out at the vast desert. His heart skipped, but his eyes narrowed with determination. Taking a deep breath, he rose to his paws and stepped out onto the boiling sand. Not giving himself time to back down, he darted across the ground, his tail streaming out behind him. Quickly, he bounded to the top of a nearby sand dune and hesitated when he stood at the top of the huge hill of sand.

The dark lion paused and glanced back at his friends. Fear shone in his eyes, but he simply held up a paw to wave goodbye. All three waved back to him, seeming small in the distance. Letting out a sigh, Dash forced himself to turn and bounded off the dune, afraid of losing his nerve. Behind him, his friends vanished behind a wall of sand.

Brilliant rays of sunlight shot out over the desert, blinding Dash as he stumbled across the sand. Just a few hours ago, his friends had woken up early to go to the edge of the forest. All of his friends had seemed happy to see him off, despite their worry. Even Dingo hadn't grumbled about getting up early...much. A long sigh escaped Dash's mouth as he gazed out at the miles of sand. Several hours of walking stretched out between him and Rock's camp. Somehow, that seemed like way too much time. It left too much room for thinking...and getting hopelessly lost.

His amber eyes clouded with unease, but he refused to turn back and forced himself to keep moving. One week had passed since the day of the battle. Somehow, the week had seemed too short. Most of the fighters had made magnificent recoveries and had gotten a few chances to practice fighting. Nearly every day that week, Makero had held training sessions for those strong enough to attend. The last two days had been different, though. Instead of training the troops, the King had held meetings for all the forest animals to attend. During the long meetings, he had advised all the outcasts and forest animals to hide when Rock took over. The King had also told them how to survive while in hiding. During the meeting, he had also given them some firm advice.

When Rock took over the forest, all the forest animals and outcasts were to do exactly as he said to avoid punishment. At the last two meetings,

Makero had managed to get hundreds of forest animals to volunteer to hide some of the outcasts in their homes. Considering the dingoes would be easy targets for Rock when he took over, they needed some place to hide. Most of the animals were hiding in their homes now, holed up behind boarded doors and windows and waiting for the coming apocalypse.

Dash took a deep breath and shook his nervous thoughts away. He couldn't afford to worry about the forest. Saderia would have everything under control. Instead, he thought more carefully about Dastarius's plan to make sure he knew exactly what to do.

The plan was genius, but incredibly difficult to pull off. According to Dastarius, the only way to save the forest *and* Karenisha was to give the forest to Rock. When Rock took over, the cruel tyrant would rule the forest with an iron paw and cause unspeakable horrors for the forest animals. Unfortunately, that was something that couldn't be helped. All Dash could do was hope that Rock didn't do anything too cruel and that the kingdom would be able to hang in there until he put the second part of his plan into action.

That was where the plan got complicated. Getting Saderia to let him be the one to go to Rock was easy enough, but what he had to do when he actually got to Rock was harder. There were two things he had to do. When he made it to Rock's camp, he was supposed to talk to the Leader in private. He would give Rock the forest's answer, but he would also make a deal with him. Rock would only rule the forest if he allowed Dash to rule the desert.

Alongside him, that is. Dastarius had told him it was of dire importance that he convince Rock to let him rule the desert and forest with him. No matter what, he had to get Rock to agree, or the entire plan would fall apart. Once Rock agreed to let him rule alongside him, all Dash had to do was gain his trust...or at least his apathy, so that Rock didn't perceive him as a threat. With Rock's trust and a position of power alongside him, Dash would find a way to destroy the pack from the inside and kill Rock once and for all.

The problem was that getting Rock to let him rule with him would be a difficult task. The tyrant would never want to share his leadership with *anybody*, much less 'forest food.' He didn't even have a Second in Command. The only way Dash could get Rock to accept the deal would be

to trap him with threats or blackmail. Unfortunately, there were not many things Dash could use to threaten him with. Rock had the forest backed into a corner and he was holding all the cards. Somehow, though, Dastarius had come up with a threat that just might work...if he played it right. His father had given him lots of details to use to make it work, but he hadn't exactly given him a script. That kind of worried him...

"Why are you slowing down?" The sudden low growl made Dash jump in surprise. Letting out a gasp, he whipped around and gaped in shock when he saw who stood behind him.

Dastarius's shadowed, translucent form hovered just a few feet away from him. A knowing gleam lit up his amber eyes and a cool expression covered his dark brown face.

Dash's eyes widened in incredulity. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to keep you from wasting time or doing something stupid," Dastarius growled, giving him a stern glare and coolly flicking his tail. Smoothly, he paced toward him. "The dingoes won't be able to see me, so I'll be able to walk you to their camp."

Overwhelming relief washed over Dash and he heaved a long sigh. "Thanks."

Dastarius shrugged. "I said I would walk you into camp, not that I would be feeding you lines. I might not even stay while you're talking to Rock. After all, it might seem just a little bit suspicious if you keep glancing over your shoulder when there's nothing there."

Unease and indignation shone in Dash's eyes, but he hid his fear. "Fine. Leave. I don't care."

A grin curled up Dastarius's mouth. "I hoped you'd say that. I'll stay long enough to lead you there. After that, you're on your own. If you get too scared and tongue-tied to say anything when you get there, well, then you deserve to be eaten by dingoes."

Dash rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks."

Dastarius chuckled. "You'll do fine. Now hurry up. We're wasting time."

Rock's den loomed up on the horizon, blotting out the sun and casting an eerie shadow over the dingo camp. Dash stood rigidly still several feet away, gazing up at the den with narrowed amber eyes. Hot

sunlight glinted off the spiky stones beneath the monstrous platform, sending a shiver down his spine. From where he stood, he could make out hundreds of dingoes crowding around the camp, chatting with others or tearing into fresh prey. The soft sound of their growls whispered in his ears. Even from a great distance, he could still smell the scent of blood wafting out from the camp. Several splotches of dried blood stained the sand around the camp even after a week had passed since the battle.

Fear rose in Dash's chest, but he forced it away and gritted his teeth in determination. Dastarius had vanished a few minutes ago, leaving him alone to face Rock. In the back of his mind, he wished his father would return, but he pushed the thoughts away and steeled his heart against the fear. Through sheer force of will, he made himself look confident and unafraid to push the fear out of his mind. It was up to him now. The forest's future, the outcasts' freedom, Saderia's safety, Karenisha's life...all of it rested solely on him.

Dash took a deep breath, his eyes flashing with determination. He could do this. There was nothing to fear. If anyone should be afraid, it was Rock. Did he have any idea just how many animals were plotting against him? Shaking the thoughts out of his head, Dash took one last breath, then forced himself to stalk toward the camp, leaving fear behind.

The instant he stepped close to the outskirts of camp, dingoes caught sight of him. A howl rose up from the camp and in seconds, every canine in the camp whirled around to face him, baring their fangs in dangerous snarls. Pack members crawled out of their tiny rock dens and stalked toward the edge of camp, freezing him in place. Bloodlust gleamed in their eyes and a feral snarl seemed to rise up from the entire camp. Every dingo faced him with bristling fur and bared fangs, as if daring him to come closer. With hundreds upon hundreds of dingoes snarling at him, it took more willpower than Dash knew he had to remain still and appear undaunted in the face of legions of growling canines.

"Hey, cool it!" A loud voice echoed from the top of Rock's enormous den, making Dash look up sharply. The dingo Leader himself stood on the edge of the long platform, his eyes flashing and his shaggy, dark brown tail lashing irritably. Smoothly, he leapt off the side of the platform and bounded from spike to spike until he hit the ground.

Instantly, the snarls of the canines cut off and every dog backed away from Dash. The crowd parted to make way for the Leader. With cool dark brown eyes, Rock stalked past his followers and stepped out on the edge of camp a few feet away from Dash.

His dark brown eyes flashed at the sight of the dark lion. "Who are you?"

Dash held his head high. "I'm Dash. I'm here to give you the forest's answer."

A bloodthirsty glint crept into Rock's eyes. "Okay...So? What's the forest's answer?"

Dash took a deep breath and forced himself to meet Rock's gaze calmly. "It's kind of...complicated. I think it might be best to discuss it in a more...private location."

Rock narrowed his eyes distrustfully and flattened his ears. Behind him, his leagues of followers instantly bared their fangs and snarled at him in fury.

"He wants to kill Rock!" one of them shouted, his voice lined with outrage. Other shouts and cries echoed around camp until Rock held up his tail to silence them.

While the rest of the dingoes fell silent, Rock frowned and studied Dash warily, his eyes narrowed with distrust. "Why is it complicated?"

Dash flicked his tail coolly, trying to seem unafraid. "The Princess of the forest just wants me to go over some conditions. Like which animals she wants to live."

Rock frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought. A tense silence fell over them until he finally gave a curt nod. "Fine. We'll go to my den. I'll have two guards posted directly outside the den, and I'll keep the rest of the dingoes positioned beneath it, though."

One of the dingoes behind him let out a gasp. "But Leader! He could kill you!"

Rock whipped around and shot him a cold, withering glare. "He's just one measly piece of forest food! He couldn't kill *me*!" A growl rumbled in his throat and his dark brown eyes glinted with anger. "Don't ever talk out of turn again. Unless you want to be an outcast!"

The dingo's eyes widened in alarm and he anxiously shrank back, his face dark with fear. All the dingoes around him seemed to take a step

back.

Dash didn't dare make a comment or even acknowledge the situation. Instead, he simply flicked his tail and nodded his agreement. "That will be fine."

Rock just grunted in response, then turned and stalked back toward his den, flicking his tail to signal for Dash to follow. All around him, his followers parted to make room for him, forming two huge walls of canines on either side of the narrow path to Rock's den.

Forcing himself not to hesitate, Dash took a deep breath and stalked down the line of dingoes. His heart pounded, but his expression remained calm. A few dingoes snarled at him and lashed out as he passed by, but he ignored them and kept walking. All the dogs on either side of him muttered under their breath, but he paid them no attention. His eyes remained focused on Rock's den. The mammoth formation seemed to grow bigger with every step.

His breath caught in his throat when he stopped before the den. The massive rock structure towered far above him, casting a cold shadow over him. In front of him, Rock leapt onto a low, jutting spike, then bounded to the next, vaulting off of them until he landed smoothly on the topmost platform. Dash narrowed his eyes dubiously at the spikes and tried not to shudder when he wondered what might happen if he lost his footing. Forcing himself not to think about it, he lunged at the nearest spike. The instant his paws touched the sleek stone, he leapt to the next one. Lunging left and right to higher outcroppings, he finally bounded to the highest spike and leapt clumsily onto the platform in front of Rock.

Blinking in surprise, Dash gazed at the area around him and felt dizziness wash over him. The craggy platform stretched out far, towering high over the sand. Sharp boulders rose up around the edges of the platform like vicious spikes, barring him in. The jagged edge of the platform ended way too close to him. Below, the dingoes swarming around Rock's den seemed smaller than ants. The dens buried in the sand dunes looked like dark smudges against the light brown sand. His vision blurred and he turned away from the dizzying drop, fighting back nausea.

Catching his eye, Rock gave him a cold glare, then flicked his tail curtly and stalked to the back of the platform. At the end of the long ledge, several boulders leaned against each other to form a shadowy den. Two thin

rocks leaning against each other to form a triangular archway marked the entrance. Fighting back a wave of fear, Dash followed Rock past the two rough boulders forming the archway. Behind him, two other dingoes scaled the huge formation to guard the entrance to Rock's den.

Inside the cold, shadowy depths of his bare den, Rock stalked to the dark, rocky back wall, then whirled around to face Dash, sitting back and curling his tail around his paws. The shadows of the den made his dusty dark brown fur seem nearly as dark as Bone's had been. Dash stopped abruptly in the center of the dark, empty den and sat back, hiding his fear.

"Well?" Rock curled his lip condescendingly. "What's the forest's answer?"

Dash took a deep breath and sat back calmly, trying to think of the best way to do this. An outright threat would probably result in his death, so he would have to think of a cleverer way to convince Rock. Determination gleamed in his eyes and a cool expression crossed his face—the same expression Dastarius had worn plenty of times before.

Curling his tail neatly over his paws, Dash faced Rock with cool amber eyes. "Princess Saderia has decided to let you control the forest." Rock's eyes flashed in the darkness, but Dash flicked his tail and continued before he could speak. "*If* you accept her conditions."

Rock's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say a word.

Taking a deep breath, Dash calmly met his gaze. "She wants her family to be left alone and alive. She also wants her friends to be spared. She wants the little creature named Jeb to be left alone...and she wants Dingo to be kept alive."

Rock's gaze hardened and fury flashed in his dark brown eyes. "And I want my friend back, but obviously *that's* not going to happen. All because of that *killer*." He hesitated, then coolly narrowed his eyes. "I'll let Dingo live, but he *will* be punished. He will be my prisoner. I'll let the Princess visit him every once in a while. Maybe after a few years, I'll even let him go. But first, he must pay. Dingo is a murderer. Anyone who says differently is a liar."

Dash just nodded and didn't bother to protest. Trying to fight for Dingo's rights would be futile. These so-called conditions were fake and pointless anyway. The only reason he bothered to say them was to make his act more believable. No doubt Rock would think this was a full surrender,

complete with one last plea for mercy from the Princess herself. He cleared his throat and flicked his tail. "I suppose that's...fair."

Rock shrugged absently, his eyes bored. "Good. I'll leave the others alive, too. I might have to take a few prisoner, though...We'll see. I will leave them alive, though." He flicked his tail impatiently. "Anything else she wants?"

Dash narrowed his eyes as if in thought, then shook his head. "No, I think that's it."

Rock's dark brown eyes flashed in the darkness and a bloodthirsty sneer curled up the corners of his mouth. "Good. In that case, run back to your forest and let your little Princess know that I'll be there soon with my army. Anyone who stands in my way *will* be killed, regardless of her conditions. Make sure to tell her, so she doesn't get squashed in my path."

Dash narrowed his eyes and nodded grimly. Letting a shadow creep across his face, he rose to his paws and started to turn. "All right, Rock. Enjoy your power while it lasts." With his dark words hanging in the air, he slowly started to turn toward the entrance of the den, hoping desperately that Rock would take the bait. To his relief, he did.

Rock scoffed and snickered tauntingly. "You can be bitter about it all you want, forest food, but there's nothing you can do about it. I'm going to rule the forest for a *very* long time."

Dash glanced back at him with cool, shadowed amber eyes. "I doubt it."

Rock raised an eyebrow and chuckled to himself. "All right, forest food, I'll humor you. Why exactly do you doubt it?"

Dash turned around and met his gaze with a grave, unwavering stare. "Because the Princess has a secret weapon that you don't know about."

Rock's laughter abruptly cut off. Shock gleamed in his dark brown eyes and a deathly serious expression crossed his face. A grave shadow flitted across his eyes. The dingo Leader stared at Dash for a long, tense moment, then let out a low, dangerous growl and stalked closer to Dash to glare in his face. "And what exactly would that be, forest food?"

Dash met Rock's dangerous glare unflinchingly. For several tense beats of silence, he said nothing, as if debating what he should say. After an

unnerving silence, he warily met his eyes. “The Princess...Saderia...She sees things. Things normal animals can’t see.”

Rock blinked in bewilderment, then glared at him. “What does that mean?”

“Well...” Dash coolly flicked his tail, then looked up and met Rock’s eyes with a calm, serious expression. “Among other things...it means she can see the future.”

Rock’s eyes widened and he gaped at Dash in disbelief, his dark brown irises wild with shock. For several heartbeats of silence, he simply stared at Dash in incredulity. Then, without warning, he burst out laughing. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” Rock shook his head and snickered. “Forest food can’t see the future! No one can!”

Dash calmly shook his head, his eyes dark with grave seriousness. “No, Rock, you’re wrong. *She* can. Why do you think she teamed up with the outcasts?”

Rock’s laughter stopped abruptly. Narrowing his eyes in a dark glare, he faced Dash with a wary expression. “What do you mean?”

“She knew you had Karenisha.” Dash lightly flicked his tail. “She told me. She told me that you had Karenisha and that you were planning on using her against us weeks ago. That’s why she went out into the desert in the first place—to seek out the outcasts.”

“Huh?” Rock tipped his head to the side, his eyes bright with utter bewilderment.

Dash heaved a weary sigh. “It’s hard to explain. She...she sees all these details about what’s going to happen in the future, and she figures out exactly how to stop it from happening. She knew you had kidnapped Karenisha a long time ago. Way before that, though, she predicted that you would exile many dingoes when you became Leader. Once she saw that, she realized those outcasts would become so desperate that they would side with her in search of a better life—that’s another thing she predicted. Knowing that, she purposely sought out the outcasts, so she could have them join her army and use them to attack you.”

Rock’s eyes widened in shock and his mouth gaped open in disbelief. “No...No, that’s not possible! She couldn’t have predicted *all* of that!”

Dash raised an eyebrow. “Do you really think everything she’s done lately has been a coincidence? Finding the outcasts, banding them with the forest animals, attacking you... Do you really think none of that was connected?” His eyes flashed knowingly. “Remember how everyone was fighting to get to your den in the battle? That wasn’t just to get to you, Rock. That was to get to Karenisha. Saderia’s powers told her you were keeping her below your den.”

“You’re bluffing!” Rock staggered back in alarm, his eyes wide and his shaggy tail lashing wildly back and forth. “There’s no way...No one can predict the future!”

“Saderia can.” Dash met Rock’s gaze coolly and let a faint smile creep across his face. “She’s been able to do it all her life. Think about what she’s done in the past. Why do you think she sat back and watched while Dingo fought Bone instead of trying to help him all those months ago? She knew Dingo would win. Why do you think she ran away when the rest of the pack chased Dingo? She knew he would live. How do you think she found Dingo to begin with? She purposely sought him out because she knew he would help her.” He sneered and calmly flicked his tail. “Does all of that really sound like coincidence, Rock?”

Rock wildly stepped away from him, his dark brown eyes wide with horror and disbelief. All the dusty brown fur along his back rose up in alarm. “There’s no way...You’re lying!”

“No, I’m not.” Dash’s eyes shone with dead seriousness and his calm eyes never left Rock’s stunned face. “Think about it. Back when Saderia first met Dingo, he saved her life a million times. Why would she have just sat back when he fought Bone instead of trying to help him? That’s what anyone else would do, right? They would try to help their friend. But she didn’t bother because she knew Dingo would win. She predicted it.”

Rock’s mouth gaped open in shock. “She knew Bone would die?”

Dash nodded, letting a small smirk creep across his face. “Yes. She knew a lot of things, Rock. How do you think a lost piece of forest food managed to survive in the desert for an entire month anyway? She predicted everything that was going to happen and made a plan to overcome all of it. Do you remember that time she and I stepped into your old camp—back when Dingo was an outcast and Bone was still alive? It started flooding

right after she stepped into camp, didn't it? She knew it would rain and she knew what time it would start. Why else would she step right into a dingo camp unless she knew she was going to be saved? She predicted the rain would come and scare the dingoes off, giving her a chance to escape. She actually went into that camp to kill Bone, knowing that if her plan failed, the rain would come and offer her an easy escape. And as I'm sure you saw, it did."

Rock's eyes grew as round as saucers. All the fur along his back bristled in alarm and his face twisted in incredulity. "You...You're right!" The dingo Leader stared at him in horror and staggered back a few paces in shock. "But...how is that possible?"

Dash flicked his tail, his eyes glowing knowingly. "It's a skill passed down in her family. She was born with it and she's been using it since infancy. By now, she's very adept at using it." Sneering faintly, he rose to his paws and began to pace across the dark, rocky floor, keeping his eyes locked on Rock's face. "I'm not sure exactly how it works, but she's told me a bit about it. From what I understand, she sees these...*flashes* of what will happen in the future. *When* she gets these flashes varies. Sometimes she sees what will happen months in advance, and sometimes she sees what will happen right before she enters a situation that might be dangerous." He abruptly stopped pacing on the rocky floor of the den, his eyes gleaming with a sudden dark, grave sense of seriousness. Slowly, he turned around and looked Rock in the eye with a cool, shadowed expression. "I've come to realize, though, that Saderia can also predict the future actions of individual animals."

Rock narrowed his eyes and watched him warily. "What do you mean?"

Dash flicked his tail nonchalantly. "Say there's an animal she's suspicious of...you, for example. I'm not sure how she does it, but if she concentrates hard enough, she can make herself see visions of the future that relate to whatever she's thinking about. If she's focusing specifically on you, she'll be able to use her power to know what you will do in the future. That's how she knew you were going to use Karenisha against us. She tried to combat that by starting the war, but unfortunately, that plan didn't work out."

Rock blinked several times and frowned in bewilderment. "But... why didn't it work? If she can predict everything...how come she didn't win?"

"Because a war isn't just about one animal." Dash's eyes flashed and a sneer twitched at his mouth. "It's about *all* animals on both sides of the conflict. Saderia might be strong, and with her powers, she's able to predict the actions of every dingo in the desert, but she's not physically strong enough to fight off hundreds of dingoes by herself, regardless of what she sees in the future. None of the animals in her army have her power, so they had to fight normally. Why do you think Saderia came out of the fight alive and with few injuries, though? Whoever she *did* fight, she used her powers to predict what they were going to do and she was skilled enough to counter their moves before they could even make them. But because of the sheer size of her army and your army, she couldn't tell what *everybody* was going to do. She couldn't account for *everyone* her army would have to fight with. That's why she didn't win. Make sense?"

Rock frowned and narrowed his eyes in thought, nodding absently. "Yeah, kind of..."

"Good." Dash carelessly flicked his tail. "That's why we lost. But trust me, Rock, Saderia has learned from her mistakes. She may be surrendering now, but you can be sure that every second you rule the forest, she'll be predicting everything you'll do. You might be able to rule the forest for a while, but eventually you'll slip up. And you don't even have to slip up in the present before it will all be over. You might make some mistake in the future. Saderia will see that and she'll find some way to destroy you before you even realize what's happened."

Rock's eyes bulged in horror. "So...you're saying..."

"She can predict your every move." Dash's eyes narrowed and a cool glint shone in their amber depths. "You can't fight an enemy like that, Rock."

"No, I can't!" Rock leapt to his paws and instantly started pacing, his long, dusty brown fur bristling and his face pale and drenched in sweat. His dark brown eyes grew wide and hollow with anxiety. "There...there's got to be a way! I could just...kill her!"

"No, you can't." When Rock whipped around to face him with wide, horrified eyes, Dash simply flicked his tail and shrugged. "She'll know

you're coming to kill her. She'll even predict how you'll go about doing it and when you'll do it, and then she'll find some way to escape and prevent it." A dark, dangerous gleam glowed in his amber eyes. "Many animals have tried to kill Saderia, Rock. All of them have failed. Most are dead."

Fear shone in Rock's eyes and he swallowed nervously. Sitting back, he flattened his ears and gazed at his paws, letting out a nervous growl. "There...there's got to be some way to fight her!" Dozens of emotions played across the dingo Leader's face. Hope, despair, anger, disbelief, helplessness, confusion...With each new emotion that crossed his face, his eyes grew cloudier, as if he was trying desperately to understand but only growing more and more confused with every attempt to make sense of it.

A tiny sneer spread across Dash's face. Clearly, this was really messing with his head, confusing him and unraveling the very way his mind worked. Triumph gleamed in his amber eyes. Dastarius had told him this would happen if he pulled off his act well, and he had done it. Somehow, he had managed to pull off his act perfectly. His skill at lies and acting might even make his father, the master of illusions himself, jealous.

Dash's eyes gleamed in the dim light. It had been Dastarius's idea to smudge the truth about Saderia's powers and make up a few new rules while still sticking to a stable, provable basis—her ability to see the future. The dark lion had told him to use her power as a threat. Even though he had been impressed with the plan, Dash was amazed to see how well it had worked. Anticipation shone on his face. Now for the next phase...

Dash narrowed his eyes to meet Rock's gaze with a dark, sincere expression and lowered his voice to a soft, mysterious whisper. "I can fool Saderia."

Rock looked up sharply, his eyes wide with shock. "You...You can? ...How?"

Dash absently studied his claws. "It's hard to explain. It took me a while to figure out, and it's not something I could easily describe, but I have a way of keeping my future out of Saderia's reach. Even with that, though, I hardly have to worry about fooling her because she never tries to predict what I'll do. After all, I'm her best friend."

Rock's eyes widened in shock. "You're her *friend*?"

“For appearances...yes.” Dash flexed his claws and calmly flicked his eyes up to meet Rock’s gaze. “Wouldn’t you want to be friends with someone as powerful as her?”

Rock blinked several times. “Touché.”

A faint grin curled up the corners of Dash’s mouth. “Saderia won’t be able to predict what I’ll do. She won’t bother to look into my future, and even if she does, there’s a good chance she won’t be able to see a thing.” He paused, then met Rock’s gaze with a gravely serious expression. Smoothly, he stalked closer to the dingo Leader until they stood eye to eye. “How about this, Rock? I’ll make you a deal. I’ll do *all* of your work for you—I’ll help you take over the forest, I’ll take care of anyone who opposes the change, I’ll deal with prisoners, and I’ll do all the work involved in your takeover. If I do it, Saderia won’t see it coming, whereas if you do it, she’ll predict it and stop you way too easily.”

Rock’s eyes widened in shock. “You want to help me?” When Dash nodded, he gaped at him in incredulity and stared at him for a long moment, letting silence fall over them. After a long, tense moment, he narrowed his eyes to slits and let out a dangerous growl. “So what’s the catch? What do you want in return for all these favors?”

Dash held up a paw and studied his claws absently, as if he had all the time in the world. His calm, narrowed eyes flicked back and forth across the shadowy den before flitting back to Rock’s face. “I notice you have no Second in Command.”

Rock narrowed his eyes in bewilderment, but gave him a slow nod.

Dash dropped his paw and faced Rock with a calm, unwavering stare. “What I want in return for everything I’ll do is to rule with you as your Second in Command.”

Silence filled the room.

Rock gaped at him in disbelief, his eyes stunned. For several tense moments, the Leader stared at him in shock, unable to speak. After a tense beat of silence, he blinked, paused, then burst out laughing. Howling with laughter, he practically doubled over, choking out a few stunned words. “Forest food...as Second in Command? Are you *insane*?!”

Dash simply shrugged. “It’s either that, or you’ll have to deal with the Princes predicting your every move.”

Rock's laughter instantly died away. A shadow flitted across his face and his expression darkened with horror. Narrowing his eyes, he faced Dash with a dark, wary expression. After a long, thick silence, he let out a low groan and looked away, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "I hate forest food," he muttered. "Why is this all so *complicated*?"

"It doesn't have to be." Dash met his gaze calmly and flicked his tail. "I'll do all the work for you, and all I ask for is to share your power."

"But...But forest food can't be Second in Command!" Rock gritted his teeth and desperately lashed his tail. "It's unnatural!"

Dash heaved a long sigh. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, Rock."

Rock flattened his ears and bared his fangs in fury, then turned away with a furious growl. Gritting his teeth, he glared at the back wall of the den, his eyes shadowed with indecision. "What exactly would you do if I made you Second in Command?"

Dash shrugged carelessly. "Everything I just told you."

"And what about the Princess?" Rock narrowed his eyes and glanced back over his shoulder, his dark brown irises flashing dangerously in the dim light. "What would you do about her? I can't kill her because she'll see it coming, but what about you?"

Dash met his eyes calmly. His serious gaze never wavered and his voice came out in a smooth, steady tone. "I will kill Saderia. When the time is right, she will die."

Rock narrowed his eyes and studied him intently, a wary expression on his face. Reading the seriousness in his gaze, he hesitated, then let a dark, evil sneer creep across his face. "You realize that if you do that, I'll no longer have a use for you."

Dash coolly flicked his tail. "I realize that. As soon as I kill Saderia, you no longer have to keep me as your Second in Command. But by that time, I will have proved that I have plenty of other uses. Who knows? By then, you might just change your mind."

Rock nodded slowly and studied him with dark, calculating eyes. A suspicious frown spread across his face. "Isn't this going against your forest? Your *friend*, Saderia?"

Dash snickered and shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose. It hardly worries me. After all, who are they going to believe? You or me? When I become

your Second in Command, I'll just tell Saderia and the others that I'm a double agent, so they'll still trust me."

Rock instantly stiffened and glared. "You're *not* a double agent, are you?"

Dash raised an eyebrow. "If I was, would I have said something like that?"

Rock narrowed his eyes in thought, then merely shrugged. "Good point. I suppose you're trustworthy." He hesitated, then let a deep frown spread across his face. A twinge of desperation haunted his shadowed gaze, making Dash have to fight to hide a haughty sneer. Clearly, the dingo Leader was rapidly running out of options and just as quickly losing his confidence. Like Dastarius had told him, he was playing right into his hands.

After a long hesitation, Rock heaved a sigh and slowly turned back to him, his eyes wary and cold. "If I were to make you Second in Command, you would *not* live in this den. First of all, it's *my* den, and second of all, you could still be a double-crosser, so I don't want you too close to me. If you want to live in the desert, I'll give you a den close to the rock for you to live in. Glamorous enough for you?" When Dash nodded, Rock lashed his tail and growled. "Good. Do you know how pack hierarchy works? Second in Commands are powerful, but the Leader always has the most power. The Leader gets the final say—so I'll always be the final authority around here. I'll be the one giving most of the orders. You'll only give orders when I'm not here, or when we have to do something that I can't let the Princess predict I'm doing, that..." His eyes clouded with confusion and he briskly shook his head, starting to look lost. "Never mind, you get the point."

The Leader paused, then gave Dash a warning glare. "There will be some rules, too. I don't want you talking to the forest animals that often unless you're giving orders. You're allowed to talk to the Princess once to lie and say you're a double agent. After that, you're not allowed to talk to her. She and her friends will probably be thrown into a prison, either here or in the forest." He raised an eyebrow challengingly. "How's that?"

Dash shrugged nonchalantly. "Fine. But I doubt you'll be able to catch Saderia. She probably already knows you're going to put her in jail, so she'll probably hide or something. You might be able to catch her

friends, but it would be best to keep them alive when you do. That way, you can use them for leverage and get information out of them.”

Rock nodded thoughtfully, though his dark brown eyes still seemed lost and confused. “Okay...Okay. That’ll work. Then, um...well, I guess that’s it. Does that work for you?” When Dash nodded, Rock sharply flicked his tail and nodded, struggling to get a hold on the situation. “Okay, good. Then...I guess I’ll go make the announcement to the pack. Once I do, you’ll be my Second in Command.” He paused, then shot him a dangerous glare. “But put one paw out of place, and I *will* exile you, like I did to my last Second in Command.”

Dash calmly met his gaze. “Noted.”

Rock simply nodded a few times, then took a deep breath and rose to his paws. Fluffing out his dusty dark brown fur and trying to regain his composure, he shoved past Dash and stalked out of his den toward the edge of the platform gazing out over the desert to hold a meeting, leaving Dash behind in the shadowy den. Trying to get the pack to accept the fact that a forest animal would suddenly become their new Second in Command would probably be a difficult task, but that was Rock’s problem. Considering his power over them, it shouldn’t be *that* hard for him to convince them to accept it.

Dash heaved a long, heavy sigh the instant Rock stepped out of the shadowy den. All his muscles seemed to relax and go numb with relief. Somehow...some way...he had managed to pull off one of the hardest parts of Dastarius’s master plan. Somehow, he had convinced Rock to make him his Second in Command. The act he had put on was actually a pretty decent one when he thought about it. His father would be proud.

A wave of cold air suddenly washed over him, raising the fur along his back. Blinking in surprise, Dash glanced over his shoulder and grinned when he saw his father appear out of the shadows of the small den. The dark lion stalked up to stand beside him, his pitch black mane blending in with the darkness and his eyes glowing in the dim light.

Catching Dash’s eyes, Dastarius let a proud sneer creep across his face. “Nice job, son. You pulled that off even better than I had hoped.”

Dash grinned and felt a warm glow of pride. “Thanks. It was easier than I thought.”

Dastarius chuckled and patted him warmly on the back, his amber eyes glowing with triumph. His cool gaze flicked toward the dark form of the dingo Leader standing several feet away on the edge of the rocky platform, still seeming befuddled after their confusing conversation. A grin twitched at the corners of Dastarius's mouth and he flicked his tail lightly toward Rock. "Messing with animals' heads is quite fun, isn't it?"

Dash nodded and suppressed a snicker. "Yeah, actually, it is."

Dastarius chuckled. "Good. Enjoy it while it lasts. Good entertainment is hard to come by these days."

Dash just rolled his eyes and tried to hide a grin. Instantly, he hid his amusement and put on a calm, cool expression when Rock turned around and glanced back at the den.

From where he stood a few feet away, the Leader studied Dash closely, a dark but almost impressed gleam in his brown eyes. "By the way...what was your name again?"

Dash let a faint sneer creep across his face. "Dash."

Rock nodded slowly, then let a cold grin curl up the corners of his mouth. "In that case...Welcome to the pack, Dash. It is now yours to rule alongside me."

Chapter Thirty-One

Tyranny

A wild commotion erupted from outside Rock's shadowy den, making Dash's ears prick up in surprise. Outraged howls and furious snarls echoed from the camp, bouncing off the walls of the empty, cavernous den and ringing in Dash's ears. The bloodthirsty growls raised the fur along his back even though he tried to hide it. On the edge of the huge platform hanging over the desert, Rock flattened his ears and glared down at the land below.

Dastarius leaned closer to Dash, sending a wave of cold washing over him. His amber eyes flashed. "Go out and stand with Rock. And remember, don't show *any* fear to those mutts beneath you. You're their leader now. They don't need another idiot ruling them."

Dash cracked a grin and felt his tension ease. "I won't."

"Good." Dastarius sneered. "Now go. Show those mutts what forest food can do."

Dash rolled his eyes, letting his muscles relax. When his father flicked his tail to signal for him to move, he gazed out at the edge of the platform through the slanted archway of Rock's den. Fear shot up his spine at the sound of the furious howls booming out from below, but he forced the feeling away. Putting on a calm facade, he stalked out past the craggy stones and stepped onto the long, rocky platform towering over the camp.

Sunlight shone down on the weathered platform, illuminating Dash's dark brown fur and shining in his amber eyes. The howls of protest boomed in his ears, but he forced his fur to lie flat and hide any signs of fear. His father was right—he *was* their leader now. He had nothing to fear. Holding his head high, Dash stalked to the edge of the long platform and stepped up to stand beside Rock, his dark brown tail flicking coolly back and forth.

At his sudden appearance, the dingoes only howled louder. Brutal snarls split the air, ringing in Dash's ears. Unable to hide his curiosity, Dash peeked over the ragged ledge before him and felt his heart sink. Legions of

dingoes crowded around the monstrous formation, completely covering the sand and nearly filling the entire camp. The huge shadow of the enormous platform shrouded them in darkness. Every dingo gazed up at the ledge with burning eyes, howling insults. Some reared back on their paws and lashed out at the air, as if wanting to leap up and attack him. The scent of blood still clung to the camp, making Dash feel nauseous. Fear slicked down his spine. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to turn away from the snarling dingoes below, using every last bit of willpower to hide his fear.

Rock glared down at the howling canines and lashed his tail in frustration. “Relax, it’s not permanent! Besides, this is a good thing! We need a piece of forest food to show us the ropes when we get to the forest so that we can rule it better! Stop complaining!”

One of the dingoes let out a furious howl. “Forest food can’t be Second in Command!”

Rock flattened his ears and let out a low growl. “Tough! They are now! Now shut up and get ready for battle! We’ve got a forest to take over!”

A pack member lashed his tail and glared up at Rock. “You can’t just let some stupid forest food come and take over! It should at least have to do *something* to prove it’s worthy!”

Dash flattened his ears in indignation. He wasn’t an *it*. A wave of unease swept over him when howls of agreement echoed around the camp, drowning his annoyance. Every pack member threw back their head and howled in fury. Wild voices joined the deafening fray, suggesting ways he could ‘prove himself.’ Within seconds, a deadly chant rose up in the air.

“Fight to the death! Fight to the death! Fight to the death!”

Dash’s eyes widened in alarm. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father stalk up to stand behind him, sending a chill racing through him. Narrowing his eyes, he shook his unruly mane out to hide his face and mouthed fearful words to his father. “What do I do now?”

Dastarius raised an eyebrow and gestured to the howling dogs with his black-tufted tail. “Can’t you hear?”

Dash flattened his ears and shot him a glare. “I can’t kill someone!”

Dastarius shrugged and met his gaze with icy amber eyes. “You’re going to have to, son, unless you want to end up as their next meal. Now get down there and hurt someone!”

Dash gritted his teeth and glared at him. Narrowing his eyes, he spared a glance at the dingoes below him and felt fear sweep over him. His paws felt cold and his heart sank with horror. How could he kill one of the dingoes down there? It wasn't like killing Rock. Killing Rock was personal—the cruel Leader had captured Karenisha, tortured her and the outcasts, and was now preparing to attack the forest. He *had* to die. The other dingoes didn't. He didn't even know them. Killing one in cold blood just wouldn't be right...

Unease shone in Dash's eyes and a cold sweat broke out on his brow. Desperately, he turned to face Rock with wide eyes, hoping beyond hope that he could calm his pack. In the back of his mind, though, he knew that depending on the evil Leader for anything was stupid. A fight to the death was probably his favorite entertainment. Still, if Rock depended on him to evade Saderia's powers, maybe he wouldn't want him in danger...

Catching his eye, Rock raised an eyebrow and carelessly flicked his tail. "Hey, forest food don't get a free pass, you know. If you're going to be of any use to me, you had better be able to win a fight. If not, I would be better off using you for your *initial* purpose—food."

Dash narrowed his eyes in a furious glare. "I'm not food!"

Rock shrugged and gestured to the crowd with a light flick of his tail. "Prove it then. Food can't win fights, so if you lose, you're food. If you win, then you're not food."

Dash flattened his ears in frustration. He officially hated dingoes. All of them were so stupid and *sick*. His eyes flicked pleadingly back to Dastarius. Desperately, he hoped his father could do *something* to help him, but he already knew a ghost couldn't save him. His father just raised an eyebrow and gestured to the dingoes, his gaze cool and icy.

Dash took a deep, shaky breath and let it out slowly, feeling horror sweep over him. Part of him wished he had never gotten himself into this mess. The thought of killing one of those dingoes just to prove himself made him feel sick with guilt. None of them were exactly what one could call 'innocent,' but then, neither were his allies, the outcasts. In any case, he had little choice. If he didn't do it, he would probably end up dead himself...

Letting out a sigh, he raised his head and narrowed his eyes, wiping fear from his face. Out of the corner of his eye, he cast one last glance at his

father, then erased any hint of guilt from his heart. With a cold gaze, he stalked up to the jagged edge of the platform and gazed down at the crowds. Throwing back his head, he let out a deafening roar. "Who wants to fight?"

Instantly, howls of excitement erupted from every inch of the camp. Bloodlust glowed in the dogs' eyes and each of them seemed to leap up at the rock, clamoring around it with eager howls. All of them bared their fangs in bloodthirsty sneers. Disgust glowed in Dash's eyes and he had to fight to stop himself from curling his lip at the sight of such eagerness to kill. Now he truly understood why Dingo despised his old pack mates...

One burly canine stepped out from the crowd and gazed up at the rock with flashing eyes. A cold sneer crossed his face and he lifted his head challengingly. "I will fight!"

Raucous howls of excitement burst out around him. Dingoes practically leapt into the air and shouted for the fight. Some clapped the muscular dingo on the back and howled wild cheers. Shouts echoed out around the entire camp, ringing in Dash's ears.

"Kill the forest food!"

"Make him suffer!"

A cold glint flashed in Dash's eyes and his gaze hardened in a dangerous glare. "Fine!" Whipping around, he stalked to the side of the rock, feeling a twinge of comfort when his father gave him an approving nod. Without a word, he lunged off the platform. Fear shot through him as he plummeted through the air seconds before his paws smacked a rocky spike. Not stopping, he lunged to a lower spike, then leapt back and forth to each jagged outcropping until his paws smacked the hot sand. Shrouded in the dark shadow of Rock's den, Dash stalked into the wide circle of dingoes. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he stopped in front of the burly pack member and coldly met his gaze.

Cockiness glowed in the dingo's eyes and a cruel, bloodthirsty sneer twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I challenge you to a fight to the death, forest food."

Dash narrowed his eyes and gravely met his gaze. "I accept."

The dingo snickered and gazed up at the high ledge. "Do you agree, Leader?"

A cold grin crossed Rock's face as he gazed down at the camp, his face blurry in the distance. "Of course. Begin fighting...now!"

Without warning, Dash snarled and lunged at the dingo, taking him by surprise. Dingoes wouldn't expect 'forest food' to strike first, after all. With a deafening snarl, he slammed into the dog, sending him stumbling to the ground with a howl. Dash's claws drove into the dingo's shoulders the instant his back smacked the ground. A cold glint flashed in his eyes and his guilt faded away. All he could do now was focus on surviving. After all, if he didn't kill the dingo first, he would be killed. Knowing the dingoes, they would probably make it as bloody as possible, too. Kill or be killed...That was the dingo way.

A yelp of pain tore out of his throat when the dingo kicked up roughly with his back paws, sending him stumbling away from him. Hastily, the pack member staggered to his paws and gaped in shock when Dash caught himself and whipped around to face him.

Hatred burned in the dog's blazing eyes. "Stupid forest food." Baring his fangs in a snarl, he lunged at Dash. Cheers erupted from the thick crowd surrounding them and every pack member leapt up in excitement, shouting for their pack mate. Gritting his teeth, Dash dodged to the side seconds before the canine smacked the ground where he had stood. Instantly, the dingo whipped around to face him, but Dash moved faster. Before the dingo had even turned, Dash raced toward him. The instant the canine whipped around, Dash tore his claws across his face. When the enemy stumbled back with a yelp, Dash lashed out again and clawed his legs, ignoring the sticky blood seeping through his claws. With the jeers of the dingoes ringing in his ears, he let out a snarl and lunged to sink his fangs into the canine's leg.

Quickly, the pack member jerked his leg out of Dash's reach and snarled. Before the lion could dodge away, the dingo slashed his face, tearing open a gash and sending him stumbling back with a cry. Desperately, Dash tried to regain his balance, but the dog swept his paws out from under him, leaving him unbalanced. With a cry of alarm, Dash collapsed and rolled helplessly onto his side. Instantly, he tried to roll around, but the dingo moved faster. With a triumphant howl, the dog lunged on him and slammed him back against the earth, digging his claws into his shoulders. Blood spilled onto the sand. A bloodthirsty sneer curled up his mouth and his eyes flashed with bloodlust as Dash struggled to get free.

Cold air suddenly washed over Dash. Without warning, Dastarius materialized out of the shadows beside him, his amber eyes flashing dangerously in the darkness. "Claw his face off!"

Dash narrowed his eyes, feeling a fresh surge of strength flow into him. With a cruel snicker, the pack member lunged at his throat, but Dash lashed out and tore his claws across the dingo's face before he could land the killing blow. Hot blood splattered his face as the dingo jerked back in alarm, letting out a cry of pain. Without hesitating, Dash kicked up fiercely, sending the dog staggering backward. Instantly, he rolled around and leapt to his paws, then whirled around to face the enemy. The howls of the pack members rang in his ears and the salty scent of blood washed over him. Dastarius's glowing eyes seemed to burn into his fur, making him narrow his eyes in determination.

Chants echoed around the camp as the bloody pack member stalked toward him, a low growl rumbling in his throat. "Kill the food! Kill the food! Kill the food!"

Dash's blood boiled with fury and he bared his fangs in a dangerous snarl.

Dastarius's eyes flashed. "Are you going to let them talk to you like that?"

Rage burned in Dash's chest and a cold shadow crossed his face. No, he wasn't.

His fur bristling in fury, Dash let out a deafening snarl and lunged at the dingo. The pack member tried to leap away, but Dash smacked into him before he could move, sending them tumbling to the ground. A yelp escaped the enemy's throat and he instantly kicked at Dash's belly, sending him rolling away. Barely wincing, Dash leapt to his paws, while the dingo stumbled to his. Blood dribbled from Dash's belly, but his eyes blazed with a dark sense of rage. The cheers of the surrounding dingoes roared in his ears.

The enemy pack dog snickered and bared his fangs. "What's the matter, forest food? Tired?"

Dash narrowed his eyes in a dangerous glare. "You wish." Without warning, he leapt at the dingo with a harsh snarl. Instantly, the dingo braced himself to intercept him, but to his surprise, Dash sailed right past him and landed neatly behind him. Blinking in shock, the dingo whipped around, but

Dash moved quicker. The second the dingo turned, Dash smacked his face, then swept his legs out from under him with a brutal swipe before a cry even escaped his enemy's mouth. The stunned howls of the pack members rang in Dash's ears, along with the cry of his enemy. Ignoring the earsplitting howls, Dash slammed a paw down on the dingo's neck the instant his back smacked the ground, pinning him down.

Shock and terror blazed in the dingo's eyes. Gazing up at Dash with a stunned expression, the dingo froze. A dangerous glint flashed in Dash's eyes and a feral snarl rumbled in his throat. "Looks like you're the prey now. Prepare to die at the paws of your new leader..."

"Enough!" The sharp command made Dash blink in shock and abruptly look up at the top of the rock. Rock glared down at the two fighters, his tail flicking distressfully back and forth. Both surprise and alarm colored his eyes. When the fighters looked up at him in surprise, the pack Leader glared at Dash, though a twinge of respect lit up his dark brown eyes. "All right, all right. You've proven your point. Now get off him. He's one of my toughest fighters and I still need him. Even if he is an idiot," he added, casting a scathing glare at the terrified dingo.

A flicker of disappointment flitted past Dash's eyes, but when he glanced down at the shaky dingo beneath him, a darker sense of unease rose in his chest. Rock wanted him to abandon the fight, and that was great, but...should he? If he abandoned the fight now, he would be a wimp in the eyes of the dingoes. But if he didn't, he would be insubordinate. Dash's ears flattened in annoyance. He hated dingo rules. No one could ever win with them.

Heaving a sigh, he hesitated, then slowly tore himself away from the nervous dog, letting out a growl and making sure everyone knew he was only abandoning the fight because Rock said so. "Yes, Leader Rock," he muttered, giving the scared dog on the ground a dark glare.

Rock studied him thoughtfully, then sneered. Snickering, he gazed at his forces and raised an eyebrow. "Well? Is that enough proof? Or should I have him kill the fool?"

Each of the dingoes exchanged nervous glances and nodded slowly, shuffling their paws. Several shot stunned gazes at Dash. Ignoring them, Dash sneered and gazed up at Rock with glowing, determined eyes. The shadow of his father hovered beside him.

A cold smirk crossed Rock's face. "Good. In that case, let's hurry up and get going." He licked his lips in anticipation. "We've got a forest to take over!"

The fresh, earthy scent of plants and trees floated out from the woods. Saderia took a deep breath and breathed the scent in, savoring the peaceful tang. For all she knew, this would be the last time the soothing smell would tickle her nose. When Rock invaded the forest, the only scent that would fill the air would be the harsh tang of blood. A long sigh escaped her throat and her ears drooped. Her dull amber eyes flicked back and forth, taking in her surroundings one last time. Soon enough, all of it would be destroyed.

Towering trees rose up around her, swaying gently in a peaceful breeze. How long before the peaceful oaks were covered in claw marks, splattered with blood, or lying lifelessly across the ground? The sun drifted slowly across the cloudless blue sky, so peaceful and unaware of the violence it was about to see. Brilliant sunlight streamed down through the bright canopy of leaves, dappling the sparse grass. The only sound that whispered through the peaceful clearing was the light rustling sound of leaves and the whistling of the wind.

Saderia's eyes shone with pain and flicked to the uneven wooden stage beneath her paws. All of her friends sat around her, gazing at the empty meeting place. Well...almost all of her friends. Dingo sat near the edge of the wooden stage. A shadow darkened his eyes, but his face was unreadable. A few steps behind them, Jeb sat gazing at the silent woods with fear in his blue/green eyes. In the middle of the stage, Makero sat with Cia and Uncle Jash. Her aunt and uncle's eyes were bright with unease, but the King merely gazed out at the woods with grave green eyes.

Saderia's gaze flicked to the wide, abandoned clearing before them. Nearly all of the forest animals and outcasts were already holed up in their homes, hiding behind boarded-up windows and doors. Most of them wouldn't come out for a long time. A few probably lingered around the forest instead of hiding in their houses. The thought made Saderia shiver with unease. The last thing she wanted was for them to get caught in the crossfire.

Only three dingoes remained in the tense clearing. Thunder, Rip, and Tear stood close beside the stage, staring at the forest with shadowed faces. A hint of fear glowed in Thunder and Tear's eyes, but Rip simply stared at the woods with a dark, resigned gaze.

Saderia let out a heavy sigh and glanced around at her friends. "Any idea what time it is?"

Dingo glanced up at the sky and calmly flicked his tail. "Probably around noon."

Her eyes clouded and her gaze flicked darkly to her paws. "Then it'll be starting soon..."

Jeb shivered and gazed up at her with fearful eyes. "Do you think Dash is okay?"

"He's fine," Dingo replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Don't worry about him."

Saderia's eyes flicked to Dingo, then returned to the ground. Dread and pain rose in her chest at the thought of Dash, no matter how hard she tried to ignore her anxiety. Knowing Dingo's words were merely a façade meant to calm her down didn't help either.

Shaking off her thoughts, she heaved a weary sigh. "Right. I'm sure he is."

Dingo's eyes darkened and a soft breath escaped his throat. Raising his head, he gazed up at the sky with a grim, knowing look. "Rock will be here any minute." His eyes narrowed in a flash of determination. Rising to his paws, he leapt off the stage and landed in front of the three dingoes beside it, his light brown eyes gleaming. "Thunder! Rip! I've got a job for you."

The two canines' ears pricked up in interest and they turned to him curiously.

Dingo faced them with grave brown eyes. "All right, guys, Rock is going to be here soon, so we need to make sure everyone is safe. Thunder, I want you to go through the forest and find any outcasts hanging around the woods. If you find any forest animals, bring them with you, too. Remember that Home of the Leopards place I showed you yesterday? I want you to lead any outcasts or forest animals you find to that place. Get them all into houses and make sure everyone is safe. Avoid Rock at all costs. Can you do that?"

Thunder dipped his head seriously. “Yes, Dingo.”

“Good.” Dingo turned to face his older brother with gleaming brown eyes. “Rip, I need you to do something, too. As soon as Rock gets here, everyone will go into hiding and stay there for a long time. While the others are in hiding, Saderia, her family, and I will also hide in other parts of the forest. This will make it hard to get word to the others without revealing ourselves, though. We can’t afford to contact our army and the others directly because Rock will be specifically looking for us. The whole point of this is to plot against Rock while he’s here, so we need a way to send messages between us and those in hiding. I’m giving you the job of being our messenger. I need you to carry messages back and forth between me, our troops, and anyone else we need to send word to. Can you do that?”

Rip’s yellow eyes glowed and he nodded eagerly. “Of course.”

“Good. Here’s how it’s going to work. In three days, you will go into the forest to meet with Saderia. Do you remember that old shack in the woods Saderia and I showed you the day before?” When Rip nodded, Dingo narrowed his eyes gravely. “That shack is the most well-hidden place we know, and it is unlikely Rock would find it or bother to investigate it if he did. You will go there to meet Saderia in three days. If there *are* pack members investigating it, then obviously, *don’t* go there. If pack members are there, avoid them and try to find somewhere else to meet. If you can’t find Saderia or me within a few hours, return to your own hiding place and come back the next day to try again. Got it?”

“Got it!” A wide grin spread across Rip’s face and he whipped around to leer at his younger brother. “Did you hear that, Tear? Dingo chose *me* to be the messenger! Beat that!”

While Tear rolled his eyes, Dingo glanced quickly up at Saderia. “Is that okay with you?”

Saderia nodded absently, her eyes clouded in thought. She had been the one who had picked the place to meet with her messenger. Out of all the places in the forest, she had somehow decided to use the old, abandoned shack that sat in the woods a few miles away from Dastarius’s house—the place where she had once found the keys to free her parents. Why she had picked it, she didn’t know, but it seemed like a decent place. If nothing else, it was well-hidden...

“Good.” Dingo turned back to face the three outcasts and opened his mouth to say something, then broke off abruptly with a stunned look of alarm.

A deafening, bloodthirsty howl erupted from the woods and broke through the peaceful silence of the forest, echoing in the still air.

All of Saderia’s fur rose up in alarm and she leapt to her feet. “They’re coming!”

Dingo whipped around in alarm, his fur bristling. Cold determination lit up his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he whipped around to face the pale faces of Thunder and his brothers. “Go! Thunder, round up the others! Rip and Tear, you hide! We’ll meet later!”

Without a word, the dingoes whipped around and raced toward the woods to dive through a thick clump of undergrowth, vanishing into the shadows of the forest. The second they disappeared, Dingo looked up at Saderia with flashing brown eyes. Gritting her teeth, Saderia dug her claws into the wooden stage and gazed out at the woods with blazing amber eyes. Fear rose in her chest, but she pushed it away. Makero stepped up behind her, his eyes grave. Behind them, Jeb, Cia, and Uncle Jash quivered in fear.

A shadow of resolution crept over Saderia’s face. “Dad,” she murmured, never tearing her eyes off the woods. “Take Cia, Uncle Jash, and Jeb to our hideout. Dingo and I will stay here to meet Rock. We’ll handle this.”

Her father’s eyes darkened grimly. “Are you sure, Saderia?”

“Yes.” Her gaze hardened. “We’ll be fine. Go. I’ll meet you as soon as I can.”

Her father hesitated for a long, lingering moment, his green eyes clouded with dread and indecision. After what felt like a lifetime, he gave her a curt, reluctant nod and turned away. “Very well.” Tearing his eyes off his daughter, the King flicked his tail to signal for Cia, Uncle Jash, and Jeb to follow him and leapt off the left side of the stage. Together, the four shaky animals darted into the undergrowth and vanished into the woods.

Another vicious howl burst out from the forest, making Saderia freeze in horror. Ear-splitting screams erupted after the cruel snarl, echoing through the forest.

Saderia’s heart sank with dread. “I guess some animals must not have hid...”

A dark shadow crossed Dingo's face. Without a word, he leapt onto the stage to stand beside her and gave her a firm, stern look. "Don't think about them. Focus on how we'll save the others later."

Saderia shuddered, but nodded and forced herself to stand rigidly still, her face pale and her eyes hollow with horror. Every inch of her ached with longing to help the animals Rock might attack on his way through the forest. Her ears flattened and she gritted her teeth, feeling her fur bristle and her heart skip. How could she just...stand there knowing her enemy was coming after her and hurting anyone who stood in his way?

A sudden chorus of howls rang out through the forest, deafening in the tense air. Screams of pain split the air as the snarls boomed through the woods. Saderia's muscles tensed at the awful sound. Dingo rested his paw firmly on hers, his eyes grim and shadowed.

Without warning, the tense air erupted with a deafening cacophony of triumphant howls and bloodthirsty snarls. Raw screams rang out from the woods around her, making Saderia shudder in horror. A harsh, crashing sound boomed out from somewhere within the woods. Somewhere just a few feet away, Rock and his army tore through the forest, cutting down any animal in their way. Shrieks reigned in the air, blasting her ears. The fresh scent of the forest had vanished. Already, she could taste the sickening scent of blood rising in the air.

Her eyes narrowed in fear. Every inch of her longed to run away and hide, but she knew she couldn't. Not yet. In order for the plan to work and seem believable, Rock would have to see her, the broken ex-ruler of the forest, one last time before she fled. Even though she hated the idea, it was the only way Rock would know he had won.

An ear-piercing scream suddenly rang in the air, making Saderia wince. Desperate to block out the sounds, she squeezed her eyes shut, but the instant her eyes closed, the world around her disappeared. The thick scent of blood washed over her until she could taste it. In the darkness, she could see glistening grass stained red with blood. Scarlet liquid splattered the woods everywhere she looked. All she could see was destruction. Ancient trees scarred with claw marks; bushes drenched in blood; flowers wilting in a pool of sticky scarlet. The sound of paws crashing through the woods echoed all around her. Bushes rustled and branches snapped as grass was trampled to the ground. Bloodthirsty howls shattered the peaceful air.

Cold fear rose in Saderia's heart and her eyes fluttered open, making the bloody scenes fade away.

Howls rang in her ears as the clearing around her swam back into focus. Horror made her blood run cold. Her heart stopped with dismay. What she had seen wasn't a nightmare. All of the horrible visions she had seen were happening in her forest right at that moment. And there wasn't a thing she could do about it...Her paws shook and she gritted her teeth, shaking with the desire to stop Rock. Every instinct screamed at her to do *something*, but she couldn't. All she could do was wait. Doing anything else would be too dangerous...

A raw, guttural scream suddenly split through the forest, tearing her out of her thoughts and making all the fur on her back stand on end.

"Tawny, get back here!"

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. In a instant, all her resolve disappeared and her heart skipped to life. A fiery sense of rage and determination poured into her heart, lighting her blood on fire. Not Tawny. Not an innocent cub. She would *not* let that brute kill a cub.

Before she could stop to think, she gritted her teeth and lunged off the stage in one smooth leap. Dingo's eyes widened in shock and he staggered to the edge of the stage as she took off running across the clearing, moving as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Saderia!" He gaped after her in disbelief. "What are you doing? Come back!"

His words died away behind her. With blazing amber eyes, Saderia dove into the thick undergrowth on the outskirts of the clearing and raced into the woods, never stopping to look back. Her heart beat wildly and her claws scored the earth with every step. Fire burned in her chest and turned her blood to lava. Dark green flashes of bushes and trees swept past her as she soared through the woods, a wild blur of brown and green. Roots slammed against her paws to trip her, but she leapt over them and kept moving. Weeds tangled around her legs as if to hold her back. Low-hanging branches tore at her fur and smacked her face like a whip. She ignored every one of them. Never once did she slow down. Her paws slammed the ground and tore through thick clumps of undergrowth with a violent rustle.

The howls and screams echoing from the woods grew louder until Saderia could barely hear herself think. Raw shrieks and brutal snarls

resounded from every corner of the woods, raising the fur on her back. All around her, the woods seemed to blur, but she forced herself to keep running, never daring to stop. Her eyes darted frantically back and forth, searching for any sign of the leopard cub or Rock. Her gaze flicked to a patch of dirt a few feet away from her and she instantly froze, her eyes growing wide with horror.

Tawny stood alone on a patch of dirt with grass curling up around her, her fur bristling in terror. Just a few feet away, Rock's army charged through the woods, tearing past bushes and trees and heading straight for the petrified cub. The leader of the army was none other than Rock himself. His cruel laughter boomed in Saderia's ears, making her feel sick. Blood tainted the air with a rancid stench that made her stomach turn. The howls of the pack members screamed in her ears, making her heart pound. A wild cry tore out of her throat and she lunged forward as fast as she could, desperate to reach the paralyzed cub before Rock.

Her muscles shrieked in protest as she pushed herself to run faster. The entire world seemed to blur. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of spotted fur and saw Maeta bounding through the thick woods on the right, racing hopelessly toward her niece. Her mouth gaped open in a desperate shout, but her cry was drowned out by the howls of the dogs. Horror rose in Saderia's chest and a scream tore out of her throat.

"Tawny, run!"

The cub let out a gasp of surprise and whirled around, her eyes wide with terror. Gritting her teeth, Saderia bunched her muscles and lunged toward her. A shriek tore out of the cub's throat just as Saderia's fangs closed around the scruff of her neck. Landing clumsily with the cub, Saderia looked up sharply, tensing to run. Her paws froze in place and her eyes widened in terror when she found herself staring into the cruel eyes of Rock.

The Leader lunged at her, his eyes bright with triumph. Desperately, Saderia dodged to the side, but a paw slammed into her legs just as she leapt into the air. With a gasp, she stumbled to the ground and tumbled onto her side. Tawny flew out of her grasp and rolled across the bloody grass with a squeal of alarm. Gasping in horror, Saderia staggered to her paws and leapt toward the cub. While Tawny stumbled fearfully to her feet, Saderia stepped over her to protect her. Rock's forces circled around her,

snickering coldly. Saderia's fur bristled in fury, but her eyes gleamed with fear. Desperately, she huddled over Tawny, shielding her from the others. At that point, it was the only thing she could do.

Rock's wild laughter reached her ears. Suppressing a shudder, she looked up with narrowed eyes and felt her heart sink. The Leader stepped toward her and leered down at her with a sick, delighted glint in his dark brown eyes. A cruel smirk curled up the corners of his mouth and he hungrily licked his lips. Beside him was Dash. The dark lion stared at her in horror, his eyes darting wildly back and forth, as if searching for some way to save her. All around her, dingoes circled her, letting out triumphant, bloodthirsty howls.

Rock snickered and gazed down at her with a triumphant sneer. "So this is who the forest's Leader really is. A weak, defeated little girl." He stepped closer and bared his fangs. His muggy, blood-scented breath washed over her face, making her curl her lip in disgust. With the eager howls of the dingoes echoing around him, Rock let out a cruel chuckle. "We won't kill her. Not yet anyway." All the dingoes seemed to snicker at his words.

Smirking to himself, Rock crept closer to her, but Saderia wasn't about to give up. Gritting her teeth, she lashed out at him when he moved too close, tearing open a bloody scar on his muzzle. The Leader jerked back with a yelp of surprise. With flashing eyes, Saderia crouched over Tawny, letting out a dangerous growl, as if daring him to come closer.

Rock blinked in surprise, then let an eerie sneer curl up the corners of his mouth. Shaking his head, he let out a chuckle. "Looks like she still has some fight left in her."

All of the dingoes snickered. Letting out low growls, they started creeping toward her, leering at her with bloodthirsty sneers. Snickering, Rock slunk closer to her, his eyes flashing with triumph. All the fur on Saderia's back bristled. Pressing Tawny closer to her, she took a few nervous steps back. Fear shone in her eyes and her tail flicked nervously back and forth as the dingoes closed in on her. She could feel their hot breath on her fur.

Rock snickered and stepped right up to her to sneer in her face, revealing blood-soaked fangs. "I guess we'll have to torture it out of her."

"Over my dead body!"

Without warning, Dingo lunged over the heads of the circling canines and slammed into Rock before he could realize what had happened. With a yelp of surprise, Rock tumbled to the ground, pulling Dingo down with him. Dingo's claws dug into Rock's shoulders the instant he hit the ground, but Rock kicked up sharply with his back paws and raked his claws across Dingo's face, sending him stumbling back. Letting out a furious howl, Rock leapt to his paws and faced Dingo with blazing eyes. All his fur bristled in rage and he bared his fangs in a snarl. Across from him, Dingo caught his fall and whipped around to face him with burning brown eyes, a growl rumbling in his throat.

In an instant, every dog seemed to forget all about Saderia. All eyes turned to Dingo and an earsplitting round of snarls echoed around the woods. No one cared about her. Dingo was the most hated animal in the desert. He was the one they truly wanted.

Rock's dark brown eyes glinted with hatred. "So...It's you again. The murderer."

Dingo glared back at him with shadowed brown eyes. "Who else, Rock?" Flattening his ears, Dingo lunged at him with a deafening snarl. Rock's eyes widened in shock and he instantly leapt back to avoid the attack. Landing clumsily on the ground, Dingo whipped around and lashed out, catching the side of Rock's face. When the Leader winced, Dingo lunged and sank his fangs deep into his leg. A loud howl of pain tore out of Rock's throat. Gritting his teeth, he tore his leg out of Dingo's grasp. Before the canine could regain his balance, Rock slammed his paw into his face, ripping open a deep gash and sending him tumbling backward with a gasp. Instantly, the Leader chased after him and raised a paw to bring it down on his head, but Dingo caught himself and grabbed Rock's paw when he tried to attack. With one quick movement, he snapped Rock's leg out to the side, then slammed his paw into his face, sending him staggering away with a cry of pain.

Dingo's eyes shot to Saderia's face while Rock stumbled back. His gaze darted to the tiny cub beneath her, then flicked back to her. A weary sense of resignation shadowed his eyes. Before he mouthed the word to her, she could read it in his eyes. "Run."

Her eyes widened in horror. Seeing her fearful look, Dingo narrowed his eyes into a stern, serious glare. Looking into his dark, blazing

brown eyes, she knew she had to get out of there. She was the one in charge of the war, the one who *had* to remain free. She was the one who had to put their plans into action. If she was captured, the war was lost.

Feeling cold dread wash over her, she met his eyes and nodded hollowly. A second later, Rock caught his balance and lunged at Dingo. Before Dingo could fight back, Rock slammed him against the earth and drove his claws into his belly, tearing long, bloody lines through his shaggy brown fur. An agonized howl tore out of Dingo's throat and he thrashed wildly. All around him, pack members gathered to watch, howling for Dingo's blood...and clearing a space for her to run. Sickness rose in Saderia's chest, but she knew if she didn't run, not only would she be in danger, but so would Tawny. If Rock caught her, she would live to be tortured. The same couldn't be said for the cub. Gritting her teeth, she cast one last painful glance at her blood-streaked friend, then grabbed Tawny by the scruff. Forcing herself not to hesitate, she whipped around and dove into a nearby bush, then took off running as fast as she could.

Tawny's frightened sobs echoed in her ears as she soared through the dense woods, never once daring to look back. Dingo's strangled howls screamed in her ears, making her shudder. When another agonized howl split the air, she wanted to tear off her own ears to block out the tortured sound. Flattening her ears and fighting back tears, she forced herself to keep running. Rock's cold, triumphant voice echoed through the woods.

"Make sure the murderer doesn't get away. I'm going to enjoy torturing *him!*"

Pain flashed in Saderia's eyes and sickness rose in her throat until she felt like she was going to be ill. Her entire face turned green at the thought of what Rock might do to Dingo. No one hated Dingo more than Rock. She couldn't imagine the pain he was in for. And what if Rock got bored with torturing him and decided to just kill him instead?

Horror rose in her chest and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to fight back fear. When she opened her eyes, she looked up and instantly skidded to a halt when a spotted figure stepped out in front of her. Her eyes widened as she slammed to a stop and she nearly dropped Tawny in her surprise. Alarm rose in her chest, but when she gazed up at the animal, a deep sense of relief washed over her, making her muscles feel numb and weak.

Maeta stood in front of her, her eyes wide with fear and gratitude. Fearful tears glimmered in her eyes and her legs shook as she faced Saderia, her sides heaving with heavy pants. "Thank you," she choked out. Relief shone in her eyes as Saderia set Tawny down in front of her. Instantly, she drew the cub toward her and let out a shaky gasp. "Thank you so much. I don't know how she got out. I don't know why. I'm sorry."

Saderia took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. Gruesome images of the torture Dingo might have to suffer flickered through her mind when she closed her eyes, but she fiercely pushed them away. Dingo's capture hadn't been in vain. Together, they had saved a cub. A shaky breath escaped her throat and she made herself nod at the trembling leopard leader, feeling weaker and weaker by the second. "It's okay. Just...just get out of here. Take Tawny back to the Home of the Leopards and don't leave. I...I'll be fine. I have to find my Dad."

Pity shone in Maeta's brown eyes. Nodding hastily, she said nothing and ducked down to grab Tawny by the scruff. Without a word, she whipped around and raced off into the woods as fast as she could, leaving Saderia behind in the shadows of the woods.

Taking a shaky breath, Saderia watched Maeta bound away and disappear behind a wall of dense undergrowth. Horror shone in Saderia's eyes when she realized she could see the bodies of a few forest animals scattered through the thick trees. Most lay strewn around in one area—the blood-soaked path Rock had torn through the woods. Disgust and pain rose in Saderia's throat, forcing her to turn away. The sickening stench of blood and death rose in the air, sending shivers down her spine. Pain shone in her eyes. Every part of her longed to just curl up somewhere and hide. Forcing herself not to panic, she darted deeper into the woods with a swift rustle of leaves. Earlier that day, she and her father had decided to use Dash's old clearing in the woods as a hideout. If she could just get there, she would be fine...

Far behind her, Rock's dangerous snarl rose up from the woods. "Six of you, go and hunt down that stupid Princess. I want her to watch when I torture Dingo!"

Alarm shone in Saderia's eyes and she whipped around to stare at the thick woods behind her. The wild sound of paws trampling leaves and the rustling sound of animals pushing through undergrowth sounded behind

her, making her heart skip. Paws thudded somewhere in the distance. Fear glowed in Saderia's eyes. The dingoes were heading straight toward her! Flattening her ears, she whipped around and raced through the woods as fast as she could, trying desperately not to make a sound. Panting heavily, she weaved through the myriad of dark trees dotting the land. Ducking under low, leafy tree branches and leaping over roots, she darted across the wild forest floor, her muscles screaming in pain.

Terror glowed in her eyes. Using every bit of strength, she forced herself to keep running and didn't dare slow down. Desperately, she headed in the direction of Dash's clearing, hoping that she could lose the dingoes on the way. The crashing sound of the dogs tearing through the woods rang out behind her, but as she wove through the trees, the sounds grew softer. Daring to hope she had lost them, Saderia darted around a thick clump of undergrowth and headed deeper into the woods. Up ahead, she spotted a tiny clearing through the dense trees—one she knew was a short distance away from Dash's clearing. Hope shone in her eyes and she moved faster, desperate to get to the hideout. Just before she bounded into the clearing, though, a vicious growl erupted from somewhere right in front of her, making her freeze.

Alarm shone in her eyes. Instantly, she skidded to a halt and dove into a thick, nearby clump of bushes. Hearing her heart pounding in her ears, she crouched down to hide in the undergrowth and pushed aside a few leafy branches to gaze into the small clearing in front of her. Her heart stopped in horror. Her father, Cia, Uncle Jash, and Jeb lay on the sparse grass, covered in blood. Over twenty pack members surrounded them, snickering and leering at them with cruel sneers. Saderia's heart sank and her eyes widened in dismay. No! Not them too!

Frozen to the spot, Saderia watched in horror as the dingoes stalked closer to her friends and family. Her paws itched to race out there and face all twenty dingoes at once, but in the back of her mind, she knew she would fail. The only thing that stopped her from running into the clearing was her shaky claws, dug deep into the earth. Sickness made her stomach churn and her hollow amber eyes clouded with guilt and fear.

One of the dingoes prodded Makero roughly in the side and growled. "We'll bring these guys back to Rock."

“Cool, more prisoners.” One of the dingoes snickered. “Rock will sure be happy.”

“Come on then.” Another burly pack member lashed his tail and let out a growl. “That Dash guy told us where Rock would make his new prison. Let’s take them there.”

The other dogs grunted in response. Slowly, the dingoes crept closer to Saderia’s family to take them away, their eyes glittering with malice. Fear shone in the eyes of Jeb and Saderia’s aunt and uncle, but Makero just gazed around with dark, resigned green eyes. Gazing at the dingoes, Makero studied their faces with shadowed eyes. At the last minute, he gazed at the woods and let his eyes land directly on Saderia’s face. Saderia’s breath caught in her throat, but Makero didn’t react. His eyes bored into hers, shadowed with resignation. The King watched her for a long moment, then slowly mouthed one word. “Hide.”

Horror rose in her chest, but she bit her lip and gave him a miserable nod. A weak smile crossed his face a second before a dingo smacked him over the head and knocked him out to drag him away. All the dogs surrounded her family and started to drag them away, blocking them from her sight.

Saderia blinked rapidly and tried to bite back pain. Her entire body felt shaky as her family disappeared into the woods with the horde of laughing dogs. Her mind whirled and the entire world seemed to tilt. This wasn’t supposed to happen! She gritted her teeth and drove her claws angrily into the earth. Rock must have sent dingoes into the woods to investigate while he took over the forest...But that wasn’t the way it was supposed to work! Saderia and *all* of her friends were supposed to have been safe! They were supposed to have found a safe hiding place to plot to overthrow Rock! But now she was the only one left. First Dingo had been captured, then Jeb and her family. Now it was all up to her...

Saderia felt her heart sink, but before she could think of what to do, a sharp, furious snarl rang out behind her. “There she is! In the bushes!”

Her eyes opened wide with alarm. Without thinking, she dove out of the bushes and raced across the empty clearing as fast as she could. Gasping, she lunged into the undergrowth on the other side of the small clearing and took off running, her tail streaming out behind her. Dense green undergrowth swam past her in a blur as she wove between trees.

Weeds tugged at her legs and roots stubbed her paws, but she didn't dare slow down. The dingoes had found her. If they caught her, the forest didn't stand a chance. Not if *all* of their leaders were captured.

Snarls and paw steps thundered behind her, crashing through the undergrowth. Panting wildly, Saderia soared through the woods. Pain screamed in her legs and her muscles burned in agony at being pushed so hard. Fear glowed in her eyes. She knew she couldn't keep this up forever. Unless she found some place to hide, she would be caught.

Her eyes darted frantically back and forth, searching the blurred undergrowth for a hiding place...*any* hiding place. No matter where she looked, though, the only thing she saw were towering trees and thin bushes. If she tried to hide in a tree hollow or a patch of undergrowth, she would be found in seconds. There *had* to be something else! Her vision blurred with pain and her paws stumbled over each other, slowing her down more and more each second. Howls burst out behind her and fear swam in her eyes. When she tried to look around, she realized she had no idea where she was. Her heart sank. Was this the end?

Blindly, she staggered through the woods, passing dozens of trees and smacking into low, leafy branches. Her legs shook and her breath rasped out in heavy pants. Just when she felt she was going to collapse, she stumbled through a thick clump of undergrowth and staggered out into a wide clearing. Her eyes widened in shock and she froze, her head snapping up in amazement. At the back of the clearing towered a dark, dilapidated house with walls covered in creeping vines. The cracked door hung open on its hinges.

Her eyes widened and a gasp tore out of her throat. "D-Dastarius's house!"

Shock glowed in her eyes at the sight of the house. How she had gotten there, she would never understand. Narrowing her eyes, she studied the house nervously, then froze when a howl boomed out behind her. With a gasp, she stumbled toward the house, shaking off her doubts. An instinctual jolt of terror shot through her the instant she stood in the cracked doorway, but she ignored it and darted inside. Casting a quick glance back, she slammed the broken door shut and whipped around to face the room she remembered all too well.

Dirt and debris littered Dastarius's once pristine living room. The once beautiful couches were stained and torn apart. Their stuffing popped out and spilled across the wet, dirt-covered floor. Rats seemed to have eaten holes through the peeling walls. Cobwebs were swathed across the ripped furniture. Musky darkness covered the entire room, so thick she could barely see. On the left wall, a cracked archway led into the dining room. The once gorgeous dining table was littered with dirt. Two legs were broken, making the entire table look crooked. Chairs lay on their sides, their wooden legs cracked and broken. Everything looked exactly how she remembered and yet everything was so different.

For a second, Saderia stood frozen in the doorway, staring out at the eerily familiar living room with wide, fearful amber eyes. Her heart jolted and skipped a beat when a loud snarl sounded from somewhere outside the house. "Where'd she go?"

Another pack member let out a snarl. "I don't know. Check that den!"

Her eyes lit up with fear. Letting out a silent gasp, she leapt away from the doorway and darted past the crumbling archway into the dining room. Leaping over broken chairs and debris, she dove past another cracked archway on the back wall of the dining room and scrambled into the narrow hallway leading to the left. With wide eyes, she pressed her back up against the crumbling, dirt-covered wall of the hallway and pricked her ears to listen.

A loud bang sounded near the front of the house and the door squeaked on its hinges. Paws thudded into the living room, making Saderia's heart leap up into her throat. The dingoes had pushed their way into the house. Barely daring to breathe, she inched along the wall of the dark hallway, as silent as possible. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears, unnaturally loud in the tense silence. Just a few paces away in the living room, a dark voice let out a growl. "Come on, let's look around. She's got to be in here somewhere."

Saderia's legs shook as she inched along the grimy hallway, pressed against the peeling wall. Desperately, she gazed around the shadowed hallway, searching for any hiding place. Her gaze fell on the heavy double doors at the end of the hall and her eyes widened in hope and terror. The heavy doors led to the room that led to the dungeon where she and her

parents had once been imprisoned, but when she had freed her family, she had left the once locked door open in her haste. Since then, it hadn't been touched. The door remained open.

Her heart skipped. On the opposite end of the hallway, the shadow of a dingo crept through the dining room archway. They were getting closer. Not daring to breathe, she pushed herself off the wall and darted toward the heavy doors. Feeling her heart beat frantically, she dove through the doorway. Casting one last glance at the shadows of the dingoes creeping into the hallway, she heaved the doors shut. It took every last bit of her willpower not to slam them. Cold sweat broke out on her brow, but the doors fell in place with only a soft click. Drenched in sweat, she fumbled desperately with the lock until she finally managed to seal the doors. Stepping back, she trembled violently and watched the door, never once blinking. With all her heart, she hoped the lock would hold.

Paws thudded down the hallway, drawing closer each second. One dingo let out a growl that made her jump. "Hey, let's check in here." Without warning, the doors jerked on their hinges. Her heart stopped and her breath instantly cut off. A low grunt sounded behind the door and the doors jerked again, banging against each other and rustling the lock. No matter how hard the dogs tugged, though, the lock held. The door didn't budge.

After what felt like years, the doors finally fell still. A frustrated sigh sounded from the other side. "It won't open. Let's just get out of here. I don't think she's here."

"Yeah, she must have gone somewhere else," another voice muttered.

Saderia's heart skipped to life, but her body remained stiff and frozen with fear. Slowly, paw steps sounded behind the door. Seconds ticked by like hours, but after several minutes, the steps grew quieter. Soon, they disappeared entirely. A soft bang near the front of the house signaled that they had slammed the front door shut. They were gone.

A harsh, relieved breath escaped her throat in one big rush, making her entire body feel weak. Unable to stand, she collapsed onto the filthy floor and buried her face in her paws, shaking violently and shivering in the damp air. Tears glimmered in her eyes, but she held back sobs and curled in on herself, struggling to hold herself together. Heavy gasps tore out of her

chest, making her sides heave. Her heart never stopped racing even as her body went numb. Exhaustion crept up on her as she squeezed her eyes shut.

Letting out a shaky sigh, Saderia took a deep breath and felt calm wash over her when she realized she was safe. Tiredness swept over her like a wave, making the entire room tilt around her. Unable to fight the tiredness, she didn't bother to move. Instead, she laid on the filthy ground and let herself drift off into sleep. Seconds before she fell unconscious, she realized how ironic it was that her old enemy's house was now her only safe haven.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Torture

Blood tainted the thick air. Tense silence hung over Saderia's house and shadows flitted across the dark red stains splattered across the wood floor. Dash stood rigidly still in the doorway to his home, gazing into the front room with shadowed amber eyes. Horror rose in his chest and his eyes grew dull and hollow. He tried to swallow, but his mouth felt dry. It took every bit of his willpower to hide his dismay and keep his expression cool when all he wanted to do was run in a desperate attempt to forget the scene before him.

A scarred canine lay in the middle of the front room, his eyes closed and his head lying limply on the floor. His legs were splayed out limply in all directions. Thick ropes wrapped around his front and back legs, tying him to four thick stakes struck into the wooden floor—a sort of chain keeping him tied to the ground. Blood soaked his shaggy brown fur, and bruises and scars littered his face and sides. Dingo. Rock's prime prisoner.

Before Dash could lose his nerve and back away from the ghastly sight, a low growl sounded behind him. Rock crept up beside him, his dark brown eyes bright with triumph. A cold snicker escaped his mouth and his grin grew even wider at the sight of Dingo's bloody body. Smirking to himself, he sat back and gazed down at Dingo's weak form with glittering brown eyes. "Isn't it great? This killer...finally getting what he deserves."

Dash swallowed back sickness and made himself nod. "Yes, Rock. It's great." His eyes flicked to Dingo and he had to force himself not to wince. A shiver raced through him, but he made himself look calm. Yesterday, Rock had officially taken over the forest, driving everyone into hiding. Later, he had marched to Saderia's house and turned the Princess's own home into his new prison. Plenty of prisoners were locked up in different rooms, but Dingo was kept alone in the front room. As Rock's most hated prisoner, he wanted Dingo to suffer and refused to give him the comfort of having others close by.

After Rock had taken over the forest, his minions had tied up all the prisoners they had rounded up. Once all the prisoners were locked away, Rock himself had lingered in the prison to torture Dingo. Two hours had passed. Dash didn't know what he did to him. At the time, Rock had left him in charge of leading the dingoes to different forest towns to lay claim to them—a job he had done 'beautifully.' Dash didn't want to know what Rock did to him. All he knew was that Dingo had never looked worse. Scars crossed his face and his fur was drenched with blood. The ropes around his paws were tied so tightly, they were crusted with gore.

Slowly, Dingo blinked open his dull brown eyes and shakily raised his head. Shock and alarm flashed in his bloodshot eyes the instant he spotted Dash. "Dash? They caught you, too?"

Dash's heart twisted with pain. Days ago, his friends had decided to act shocked and betrayed when they realized Dash had 'switched sides' to make his loyalty to Rock more believable. Even when he could barely raise his head, Dingo was still playing along.

Dash took a deep breath and forced himself to take on a dangerous expression. "No." He calmly met Dingo's weak gaze and tried not to wince. "I'm not a prisoner."

Dingo's eyes clouded with confusion. "Then what are you doing here? Don't you know it's dangerous?"

"For you, maybe." Dash tried not to wince at his cold words and held his head higher with a dark look of superiority. "I, on the other hand, am the pack's new leader."

Dingo's eyes widened in shock and his mouth gaped open in disbelief. At the sight of his stunned expression, Rock chuckled and sneered, loving every minute of it.

Dash forced himself to let out a cool laugh. "Sorry, Dingo. I know you had your hopes set on being the new Leader, but that's never going to happen."

Rock burst out laughing and leered at Dingo, his eyes glittering in amusement. "You actually thought *you* could lead the pack? *You*?" He shook his head and snickered, a cruel sneer on his face. "You just get crazier and crazier as you go along, don't you?"

Dingo blinked several times and gazed shakily back and forth between Dash and Rock with clouded brown eyes, as if struggling to figure

out what was going on. Horror and a fake sense of realization shone in his eyes as he stared up at Dash. “You’re on *his* side?”

Dash made himself sneer. “Yes. Why wouldn’t I be? I’ve got everything now.”

Dingo’s eyes widened in horror. “I’ve got to tell Saderia! Does *she* know?”

Dash shook his head and smirked. “Of course not. She thinks I’m her best friend.”

“I’ll tell her!” Dingo bared his fangs in a furious growl. “She’ll kill you, traitor!”

Sickness rose in Dash’s chest, but he forced himself to let out a cruel laugh. “How are you going to tell her? You’re not exactly in a position to go running anywhere.” He sneered and stepped forward to flick the ropes bound around his paws. “Besides, she won’t believe you.”

Dingo gritted his teeth and let out a low growl. “You won’t get away with this!”

Dash leaned closer to his scarred face and made himself sneer. “Just watch me.”

Now. Dastarius’s voice rang in his head, sending a shiver down Dash’s spine. Every part of him wanted to ignore his father’s words, but in the back of his mind, he knew it was crucial for him to keep up his act. Feeling sick to his stomach, he forced himself to raise a paw and landed a rough smack across Dingo’s face.

Dingo’s head snapped back and he winced in pain. Narrowing his eyes, he slowly turned back around to face Dash, his eyes dull and hollow. A shadowed, dead expression haunted his face, one Dash had seen too many times before. Dingo let out a hollow, humorless laugh. “Are you going to kill me? Go ahead. I’ll tell Claw you said hi.”

Magic was the only thing that kept Dash from flinching. Pain burned in his heart and he glanced guiltily at his paws, unable to help himself. Why did Dingo have to be such a good actor? A hint of doubt shone in his eyes. What if it wasn’t an act? What if Dingo really did hate him? Even if Dash himself was acting, did that still make him a traitor?

“We’re not going to kill you.” Rock’s cool growl tore Dash out of his thoughts and made him look up sharply. The pack Leader stalked closer

to Dingo and glared down at him with a scornful sneer. "Not yet anyway. First, we're going to make you suffer."

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "I guess I haven't done enough of that already, huh?"

Dash gave him an icy glare. "Think you can talk your way out of this one, Dingo?"

Dingo grinned humorlessly. "I can *try*. Who knows? Your new partner in crime here might just be stupid enough to fall for it."

Rock snarled and whipped his claws across the other side of Dingo's face, snapping his head back. Dingo winced, then simply blinked several times and looked back up at them. Blood glistened on both sides of his face. His eyes darted left and right to look at either side of his muzzle. Catching Rock's cold glare, Dingo simply looked up at him and shrugged carelessly. "Well, at least I look more symmetrical now."

Rock narrowed his eyes in a dry glare. "You really are insane, aren't you?"

Dingo flicked his tail apathetically. "Probably."

Rock just rolled his eyes. Muttering under his breath, he whirled around and stalked toward the doorway, his shaggy, dusty brown tail flicking icily back and forth. Dash made a move to follow him, but before he could take a step, Rock whirled back around, a challenging gleam in his dark brown eyes. "Hey, Dash...You're one of Dingo's forest food, aren't you?"

Dash raised an eyebrow. "I don't belong to that idiot."

Rock rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. You used to be his friend, right?"

Dash shrugged apathetically. "You could call it that, I guess."

Rock snickered and shot Dingo a cruel sneer. "Is that why he's trying so hard to save face?" Grinning, he stalked closer to Dingo and leered at him. "Betrayed again, huh?"

Dingo shot him a dark glare, but didn't respond.

Rock chuckled under his breath, then looked up at Dash with a challenging sneer. "I've got an idea, Dash. How about you show me just how much of a friend you are?" He angled his ears toward Dingo. "You torture him. I'll tell you when to stop. If ever."

Alarm rose in Dash's chest, but he forced himself to keep a cool face. Beyond his unbothered gaze, though, his mind whirled with horror. His eyes darted to Dingo's face, gleaming with terror behind his fake calm. Dingo's eyes flicked to his face, clouded with a dull sense of resignation. The scarred canine held Dash's gaze for a long, lingering moment, then gave him the slightest nod and let his head fall back against the ground.

Horror burned in Dash's heart. He couldn't hurt Dingo! This wasn't part of the plan! His plan was to *help* his friends, not hurt them! His mind whirled, making him feel dizzy. How could he hurt Dingo after all they had been through? After all their journeys, their teasing, their serious talks? After all the times Dingo had saved him? Dingo had nearly *died* for him. Even if this was an act, how could he live with himself if he hurt Dingo?

In the back of his mind, he could hear Dastarius shouting at him to forget all that. The fate of the forest rested in his paws. If he messed up, Dingo would suffer a lot more than he would now...Dastarius's voice rang in his head, yelling at him to not screw up. Intense cold swept over Dash, making him feel weak. He didn't want to listen...but he had no choice. Moving as if in a dream, he stepped closer to Dingo and gazed down at him with wide, horrified eyes, feeling numb. Dingo's eyes flicked to his face just long enough for Dash to mouth, "Sorry." Reading his words, Dingo only nodded and let his head fall back to the ground.

Taking a deep breath, Dash closed his eyes and unsheathed his claws, then raised his paw and made himself rake his claws across Dingo's scarred side. A loud, agonized howl tore out of Dingo's mouth and he instantly jerked away from him, making the rope strain against the stakes. Blood streaked through his shaggy fur. Horror rose in Dash's chest, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to seem calm. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Rock grinning. Fighting back disgust, Dash took another breath, then flashed his claws across Dingo's face before he could think about what he was doing. Dingo yelped and jerked away from him, gritting his teeth and clutching the ropes with his paws.

Behind him, Rock let out an eager snarl. "Break his leg!"

A shiver passed through Dash. Narrowing his eyes, he glanced down at Dingo and took a deep breath. Forcing himself not to pause, he raised a paw and slammed it down on one of Dingo's bloody legs. A deafening howl tore out of Dingo's mouth as a sharp crack sounded in his

leg. His eyes squeezed shut and his head slumped to the side. Heavy pants escaped his chest. Dash didn't know if he had actually broken his leg. He didn't want to know.

Letting out a shaky breath, Dash narrowed his eyes to slits and let his vision blur so he couldn't see Dingo clearly. Forcing himself not to wince, he raked his claws across Dingo's face, then tore them across his leg and sides, tearing open deep, bloody wounds. When Rock ordered him to, he ripped open an already deep gash on his shoulder. Raw, strangled howls tore out of Dingo's throat and he thrashed wildly against the restraints around his paws. Pain rose in Dash's chest with every wound he tore open and a shudder raced through him. Keeping his eyes narrowed to slits, Dash did his best to not look at Dingo, but seeing him wasn't the worst part. Hearing the agony in his friend's deafening howls was by far the worst. Every time Dash's claws met in his flesh, an earsplitting howl shattered Dash's eardrums and made him tense in a desperate attempt to not flinch.

Just when he felt he was going to break, Rock's growl made him freeze. "Stop."

Instantly, Dash lowered his paw and backed away from Dingo, his mind swirling with guilt. His eyes flicked to his bloody friend and his stomach flipped over with an overwhelming feeling of sickness. Gritting his teeth, Dash forced himself to look away from the grisly wounds and turned back to Rock. A cruel, sadistic sneer covered Rock's dark brown face, making Dash feel sick with hatred. More than ever before, he wanted to kill Rock right then and there, but he knew that would be a mistake. Guards were posted in every room throughout the prison, out of sight but not out of earshot. With so many guards around, it would be way too easy for the Leader to survive. Dash would be killed instead.

Behind him, Dingo let his head droop to the ground, squeezing his eyes shut. Tears teetered on the edges of his eyes and a soft whimper escaped his throat.

Rock snickered and stalked over to Dingo, his dark brown eyes gleaming with triumph. With a wide sneer, he smacked him across the face and chuckled. "Had enough, Dingo?"

Dingo's eyes fluttered open and flicked to his face, their shadowed brown depths empty and dull. Without a word, he closed his eyes again and rested his head back on the ground.

An even wider grin crossed Rock's face. "No smart remark this time, huh?"

Dingo didn't look at him and didn't say a word.

Rock snickered, his eyes bright with triumph. "Where's your bravado now, Dingo?" He shook his head and grinned. "I knew it. I knew it all along. You might have acted all brave and tough for the forest food and the outcasts, but deep down, you're still the same weak, worthless Dingo I've always known."

Dingo buried his face in his paws and said nothing.

Rock chuckled. "Pathetic." Rolling his eyes, he whirled around and stalked past Dingo, lashing him sharply with his tail as he passed. Saying nothing, he crept through the archway into the dining room and disappeared, leaving Dash and Dingo alone.

Dash didn't know where to look. His eyes flicked up to the ceiling and lingered there in a desperate attempt to avoid looking at his friend. Beside him, Dingo didn't bother to look at him either. The scarred canine kept his face buried in his paws and didn't say a word. Tense silence spread out between them.

The rough thud of paw steps against the wooden floor made Dash look up just in time to see Rock poke his head out around the side of the dining room archway. Snickering, Rock stalked into the room and sat down in front of Dingo, leering at him. In his paw, he held a tiny container of salt.

"Here." Rock tossed the salt to Dash and grinned when the lion caught it with a bewildered look on his face. Flicking his tail, Rock gestured to the kitchen. "I found that in that room over there. I don't know what it is, but whenever I sprinkle it on the prisoners' wounds, they howl like they're dying." A grin crossed his face and he angled his ears toward Dingo. "Sprinkle it on his wounds."

Dash internally heaved a sigh and bit his lip. Trying to swallow his guilt, he reluctantly held the container over Dingo's bloody body and tipped it over. It didn't take much to make sure the salt touched his wounds. His entire body was covered in scars. The moment the salt stung Dingo's cuts, an agonized yelp escaped his throat and he thrashed viciously against the ropes. The stakes driven into the ground jerked violently, but held firmly in place.

Rock sneered at Dingo and snickered as he thrashed and howled in pain. After a moment that felt like an eternity, he flicked his tail. "All right, that should do for now."

Instantly, Dash yanked the salt container away and sat back, hiding his guilt with an expression as cool and calm as he could manage.

Rock smirked at Dash and chuckled under his breath. "Nice. Looks like you really did switch sides. I don't know any guy that would do that to a friend."

Dash swallowed hard and managed a weak nod, forcing himself to look impartial.

Rock grinned, then rose to his paws and turned to face the long hallway branching off of the front room. "I'm going to check on the other prisoners. You wait here. I'll be back." Flicking his tail, he stalked into the shadowy left hallway and disappeared, leaving the two alone once again.

Thick silence hung over them. Dash bit his lip and looked away, shaking his mane over his eyes to hide his guilt. Absently, he shuffled his paws and tried to avoid looking at Dingo. Seconds ticked by like days. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and his claws scraped the floor. Overwhelming guilt rose in his throat, making him feel sick. Biting his tongue, he tried to fight back the pain, but after what felt like hours, he couldn't take it. Desperately, he whirled around to face Dingo and opened his mouth to apologize.

Before he could get a word out, though, Dingo abruptly lifted his head and sent him a warning glare. None of his previous pain haunted his grave face. Flattening his ears, he jerked his head in the direction of the hallway and mouthed just one word. "Guards."

Dash blinked several times, then inclined his head in a tiny nod and sat back, keeping his mouth shut. A second later, Rock stalked out of the darkness of the hallway and sauntered toward the front door, his eyes glowing with triumph and amusement.

"Come on," he growled, flicking his dusty dark brown tail at Dash. "Let's get going. We'll leave this idiot to wallow around in his own blood."

Dash narrowed his eyes and cast one last glance at Dingo. Biting his lip, he slowly rose to his paws and crept after Rock. Silently, he tore his gaze off Dingo and padded out through the door, then disappeared behind the wall. The door slammed shut behind him.

Silence fell over the prison. Blinking open his eyes, Dingo slowly lifted his head and gazed at the door, his light brown eyes clouded. A slow grin crept across his face and he silently shook his head. Rock was so stupid...Letting out a soft sigh, he stretched his legs out across the blood-spattered floor. Slowly, he let go of the ropes tied around his paws—the ropes he had been holding the entire time. The frayed ends instantly fell off his paws. Carefully, he draped the cut ends of the ropes over his paws so that if any of the guards happened to walk by, they wouldn't realize he wasn't really tied up. His eyes glittered in the faint light. He had untied himself ages ago. So far, neither Rock nor his guards had realized it.

His entire body stung with pain and the wounds carved into his sides ached, but he ignored the sting. The pain wasn't that bad. Grinning wildly to himself, he rested his head on his paws, trying to hold back a snicker. Absently, he wondered when Saderia would 'save' him and the other prisoners. More than likely, a week or so would pass before he was 'freed,' but that was fine with him. Whatever Rock did to him, he could handle the torture until Saderia arrived. Actually, his suffering was probably good for the plan. Torturing him would only make Dash seem more trustworthy. Plus, Rock would like him more if he was causing Dingo pain. And Dingo had put on a good show of being hurt.

Amusement glowed in his eyes. When he thought about the triumphant look on Rock's face, he couldn't help but laugh. His wild laughter filled the entire house, but he didn't bother to stop it. After all, the dingoes guarding him already thought he was insane and random bursts of laughter fit the description of crazy. A wide grin crossed his face. Rock was just so stupid! For twelve years, Dingo had pretended to be weak. Every time Bone or Rock had attacked him, he had pretended to be hurt. After a bit of acting, they had left him alone even when he wasn't that badly injured. His entire life, he had been faking it. At least Bone had been smart enough to catch on. Rock apparently hadn't gotten the memo. After all this time—even after he had killed Bone—Rock *still* thought he was weak.

Dingo's laughter died away and his eyes flicked to the door. A sudden shadow flitted across his eyes, wiping the smile off his face. Rock's torture hurt, but it wasn't nearly as bad as the pain he had suffered before. Nothing could be worse than the years of torture Bone had put him through. In the end, though, his tormentors would share the same fate.

Blinding morning light streamed into the camp, heating up the desert sand and glinting off of Rock's enormous den. Dash sat on the boiling sand, blinking sleepiness out of his eyes and gazing around at the camp. Sand clung to his dark brown fur and made his skin itch with discomfort, but he did his best to ignore it. Sweat drenched his fur and made his damp, unruly mane cling uncomfortably to his face. Tiny grains of sand tickled his nose and eyes, making him lash his tail in annoyance. Only a few days had passed since he had moved into the desert, but already he wondered how dingoes could stand to live there.

His tiny rock den stood behind him, covered in sand. Much smaller than what he was used to, the empty den had barely given him enough room to lie down. It didn't matter, though. Sleep had eluded him anyway. Memories of Dingo's bloody body had haunted his mind, making it impossible to rest. Heaving a sigh, Dash gazed out at the camp around him. Hundreds of dingoes milled around the sandy camp, sitting by their dens or gathering around the water trough in the center of camp. The soft murmur of conversation floated in the air. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, Dash gazed up at the huge ledge jutting out of Rock's den and heaved a sigh.

"Go talk to Rock." Dastarius's low voice sounded behind him, making Dash look back in surprise. The dark lion sat behind him, his wispy tail flicking lightly back and forth. His amber eyes glowed in the bright light. "Rock will want to go to the forest today to mess with the prisoners and whatnot. Find a way to use that to gain his trust."

Dash heaved a weary sigh. "Fine. I really don't want him to mess with the prisoners, though."

Dastarius rested his wispy tail lightly on his shoulder. "You've got nothing to worry about, son. It will all pay off in the end, and the canine knows it."

Dash rolled his eyes in annoyance. "His name is Dingo."

"Fine." Dastarius lightly flicked his tail. "Either way, *Dingo* will be fine. As soon as you left, he seemed all right. I was watching him. Besides, I doubt he even feels pain anymore."

Dash let out a heavy sigh. "Can we just get this over with?"

Dastarius shrugged apathetically. "Sure. The sooner you accept that you're going to have to do some bad things, the sooner we can get it over

with.”

“All right, fine. I get it.” Dash rolled his eyes. “Now can we just go talk to Rock?”

Indifferently, his father flicked his tail toward the rock, signaling for him to lead.

Dash heaved a sigh and turned to gaze up at the enormous formation. Narrowing his eyes, he rose to his paws and bounded toward the den, feeling the dark shadow of the ledge wash over him. Without hesitating, he leapt toward the lowest spike, then lunged to the next. Nimble, he leapt from outcropping to outcropping until he finally leapt up to the top of the ledge and landed neatly on the long platform gazing out at the camp. With flashing amber eyes, he stepped out toward the jagged edge of the rock and hung back carefully.

Rock stood on the very edge of the ledge, gazing down at the camp with glinting dark brown eyes. At the sound of Dash’s careful paw steps, he glanced back over his shoulder and coolly flicked his tail. “Dash. I’ve been meaning to talk to you.”

Dash narrowed his eyes and cautiously stepped up to the edge of the rock. “About what?”

“The Princess.” Rock lashed his tail and frowned. “I need to get rid of her.”

Dash raised an eyebrow. “Why? What’s the rush? She’s not bothering you right now.” When Rock tried to protest, Dash coolly held up a paw. “Relax, Rock. Taking down Saderia is no easy task. Besides, I already told you, I’ll take of it.” Seeing Rock’s stern glare, he heaved a sigh. “Look...before we can get rid of Saderia, we have to find her first, but that won’t be easy. If anyone tries to find her, she’ll see them coming. If you really want to catch her, I would suggest sending search parties to every part of the forest to drive her out of hiding. I don’t know if you’ve got that many dingoes to spare, though.”

Rock flattened his ears in annoyance. “I don’t. Any other ideas?”

Dash shrugged. “It could still work. You could send as many dingoes as you could into as many different parts of the forest as you could cover. They probably won’t find her, but at least they would get a lay of the land. In a few days, once you’ve captured more prisoners and gotten a feel of the land, I’ll track her down myself. She won’t see *me* coming, and one

of your dingoes might just drive her out of hiding only to run right into me.”

Rock’s eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly. “Good plan. But why can’t you do it now?”

“Because Saderia’s not bothering us right now,” Dash replied, coolly flicking his tail. “At the moment, she’s no threat. Right now, we would benefit more from searching for more easily traceable animals. Like Thunder, the outcast Leader...your old Second in Command, I believe.”

Rock blinked several times. “Thunder’s still alive?”

Dash nodded nonchalantly. “Yes. He and the other outcasts are hiding throughout the forest. Our best course of action would be to hunt down Thunder and some outcasts and take them prisoner. We should also start invading some of the towns and taking a few prisoners from each place. The forest animals will comply with our demands if they know we have the ability to hurt someone they care about. If we capture enough prisoners, we can make the whole forest do whatever we want. Plus, you still have Karenisha.”

Rock’s eyes glowed with excitement and a grin crossed his face. “You’re right! That’s genius! I’ll start sending out dingoes to capture some of them soon.” He paused, then frowned in bewilderment. “But where should I send them? I don’t know the forest.”

Dash let a sneer creep across his face. “Leave that to me. In the forest, there are places called neighborhoods where large groups of animals live. You would be better off attacking some of those first. When you attack, though, you should leave as many animals alive as possible—the more animals left alive, the more subjects you have to rule. Oh, and you might also want to loot the towns—towns are places where forest animals keep all their supplies, like food. If we take their food supply, they’ll be a lot weaker.”

“Excellent.” Rock snickered and grinned, then paused and shot Dash a long, thoughtful glance. “I have to admit, you do come in handy.”

Dash grinned. “Good. In that case, should I start sending dingoes out to attack? I can send three groups to three different places. I’ll probably send them to neighborhoods closest to the forest’s old meeting place. I can also lead another group straight to the forest’s main town.”

“Great.” Rock’s tail flicked excitedly back and forth. “I’ll lead the attack with you. After that, I’ll go back to the desert to rule, while you get the prisoners sorted out.”

“Sounds great.” Dipping his head, Dash took a step back and sat down a few paces away, waiting for Rock to call the dingoes below to a meeting.

With a wild grin, Rock stepped up to the edge of the long, sunlit platform and threw back his head in a long howl. All around camp, dingoes slowly started to gather around the rock for a meeting.

Dash heaved a sigh and shook out his mane, hiding the dark shadow on his face. Visions whisked through his mind as Rock began the meeting. The coming raids weighed heavily on his mind. He could imagine dingoes charging into the familiar town outside his home. Breaking glass rang in his ears. Shattered windows and broken doors swam past his eyes. Canines would smash through the peaceful shops, then tear into them like pieces of prey. Shelves would be knocked over. Food would be shoved off the shelves and squashed. Books would be ripped apart and thrown to the floor in a flurry of torn paper. Goods in all the other stores would be smashed and strewn across the room. He could hear the triumphant howls of the pack ringing in his ears. If any forest animal happened to be hiding in the stores, they would be taken prisoner. The faint smell of blood tickled his nose.

In the meeting place, dingoes would crawl out of the woods, dragging prisoners with them. Bloody ropes would be tied around the prisoners’ paws. Cries of fear would rise up all over the woods. Some captives might try to escape, only to be killed or tied up again. Once the prisoners were tugged into the meeting place, Dash would be the one to lead them to Rock’s prison. In his mind, he could imagine the screams of fear that would echo behind him while he tugged the captives into the prison. He didn’t want to imagine what Dingo might look like when he stepped into the front room. If some of his captives were outcasts, he didn’t want to imagine the horror that might cross their faces at the sight of their bloody leader. All he would be able to do would be to ignore Dingo and lock up the prisoners in different rooms. Some of the bloody animals might be locked up in his own room. Still, locking up his subjects for the sake of the war would be all he could do.

A long sigh breathed out of his chest. Shadows crossed his face, but a dark gleam lit up his amber irises and determination hardened his expression. A chill crept up behind him, and he didn't have to look back to know his father had slipped up beside him.

"Good job, son." Dastarius cast him a knowing, proud glance, his eyes glinting and his shadowy form barely visible. "Rock would never suspect you were the enemy."

"Good." Dash lowered his voice to a whisper that only his father could hear. Dastarius had been right. The fate of the forest rested on him, and in order to save it, he would have to do some bad things. A cold glint flashed in his amber eyes. Why should he feel guilty for it? The only reason he was doing it was so he could gain Rock's trust. He even had a reason for taking prisoners—a reason that would be revealed in the second phase of his plan. His plan was gold and his motives pure. The forest would thank him in the end.

A sneer curled up his mouth and his eyes flashed. "I know what has to be done."

Wind whistled through the forest, making Dastarius's dilapidated house creak eerily. Saderia peeked out around the cracked door and peered out into the wide clearing surrounding the house. The grassy area was empty. The only movement and sound was the soft swaying of the grass and the gentle groaning of the trees. A fresh scent wafted off the trees surrounding the house, but the clear tang was tinged with the scent of blood. Still, the clearing was empty of any sign of life other than her. The coast was clear.

A heavy sigh of relief escaped Saderia's throat. Carefully, she pushed open the door and winced at the low, creaking sound. With an uneasy gleam in her amber eyes, she gingerly stepped out onto the soft grass and gazed around at the woods. Three days had passed since Rock had taken over the forest. In all three days, Saderia hadn't dared to leave Dastarius's house. Now, though, she had no choice but to leave. Today was the day she was supposed to meet Dingo's brother to give him a message to send to the troops.

Casting a quick glance around the woods, Saderia whirled around and dashed into the undergrowth without a sound. What message she would

have Rip pass on, she didn't know, but she still had to meet with him. The fate of the forest relied on her to make a plan, and she couldn't let the kingdom down. The lives of her friends and family depended on her.

Before she vanished into the woods, she cast one last glance at Dastarius's ruined home. An ironic smile crept across her face. Apparently, she had found her new hideout.

Silence shrouded the shadowed woods. A thick canopy of leaves towered overhead, casting darkness out over the wild grass even though the sun shone brightly in the sky. Thick oak trees covered the overgrown ground, their bark gnarled. Dozens of puffy bushes sprang up all over the wild woods, providing perfect hiding places. Saderia crouched down in a thick clump of bushes, ignoring the leafy branches stabbing into her sides. Through the myriad of prickly branches, she peered out into the woods in front of her, waiting.

The ancient, wooden shack she had chosen as her meeting place stood just a few feet away, its wood marred and rotted. Cracks lined the rough stairs leading up to it and several steps had caved in. Nearly all the windows were cracked and the inside of the old shack was covered in shadows. The old, scarred door hung open a crack. Weeds crawled all over the ancient shack, clinging to the walls and reaching up toward the weathered roof. It was just as Saderia remembered.

Hours had passed since she had taken shelter in the bushes around the shack. Just when Saderia had begun to think Rip wasn't coming, a blood red muzzle poked out from a clump of bushes, rustling the leaves. Hesitantly, Rip crept out from the undergrowth, shaking leaves out of his long, dark red fur and glancing nervously back and forth. Unease glowed in his yellow eyes as he studied the thick undergrowth. "Dingo? Are you here?"

A sigh of relief escaped Saderia's throat. Gingerly, she rose to her paws and crept out of the bushes, rustling the leaves around her. At the sudden noise, Rip whipped around in alarm and instantly bared his fangs, preparing for a fight. When she stepped out of the bushes and paused in front of him, he blinked in surprise, then let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh..." His muscles relaxed and his eyes shone with relief. "It's only you."

“Yeah...” She slowly crept closer, keeping her voice quiet. “You’re alone, right?”

“Yeah,” Rip muttered, glancing distractedly behind him and anxiously flicking his tail. “I thought I heard someone following me, but it’s gone now. I stopped hearing it a while ago.” He paused, then turned back to face her with a frown. “Where’s Dingo?”

Saderia winced, her eyes darkening with pain. “He’s...he’s not here. He’s gone.”

Rip’s eyes widened in horror. “He’s...”

“He’s not dead,” she said quickly, holding up a paw. “At least...I don’t think so...Rock’s got him.”

“Ah.” Rip narrowed his eyes and curled his lip in a furious snarl, his tail lashing bitterly back and forth. “How? Oh, wait, no, don’t tell me.” A knowing gleam lit up his yellow eyes. “He was trying to save you, right?”

Saderia looked away and heaved a guilty sigh. “Yes.”

Rip let out a soft sigh, his eyes growing dull with resignation. “I thought something like that might happen. He’s okay, though, and you’re going to save him...right?”

A fierce light shone in Saderia’s eyes. “I’m almost certain he’s all right. And yes, I’m going to save him. I just have to wait for the right moment.” Determination rose in her chest. “That’s why I’m here. I need to get the troops ready to break out the prisoners and attack Rock. I’ll have to wait for some signal from Dash before I attack, but until then, I want to start getting ready.” She paused, then faced him with glowing amber eyes. “Tell me about our troops. Are they all still in hiding? Or has Rock captured some of them, too?”

“Most of them are still in hiding,” Rip reported. “I’ve been wandering around the forest and checking on everybody because...well, because hiding gets boring after a while.” A playful grin spread across his face when Saderia rolled her eyes. Flicking his tail, he chuckled and continued. “Anyway, I’ve been keeping tabs on things around the forest. Three of those neighborhood thingies were attacked a few days ago and a lot of animals were taken prisoner, but I’m almost certain that out of all those taken prisoner, only a few of them were part of your army. A lot of our troops had to run away, though. Some of them are hiding in the woods now. A few were almost caught out there, though.”

Saderia frowned in concern. "If they're in danger, send them to me. I've found a new hideout."

Rip pricked his ears in surprise. "A new one? Why'd you need a new one? I thought you and your family were going to hide out in some clearing in the woods."

"We *were*." Saderia heaved a heavy sigh and gazed darkly down at her paws. "But the woods are crawling with Rock's dingoes. They're no longer safe. Besides...my family got captured before we could even get there."

Rip's eyes clouded with sympathy. "That sucks. So he's got my brother and...just about every member of your family, huh?"

Saderia took a deep breath and narrowed her eyes, a flash of determination lighting up their amber depths. "I'll find a way to stop Rock somehow."

A playful grin twitched at his mouth. "Yeah, I know. You have this thing about stopping the bad guys. Dingo told me." He lightly flicked his tail. "So you'll kill Rock, right?"

Saderia nodded darkly, her eyes clouding. "Yes, that's the only way to stop this."

"Good." Rip flicked his ears and grinned. "I've always hated that jerk. I've always wanted to kill him, too."

Saderia just rolled her eyes, hiding a smile. Absently, she gazed around at the woods and narrowed her eyes when an idea tickled the back of her mind. Frowning, she glanced curiously back at Rip. "Hey, Rip...if it's not too much trouble, could you bring some of the troops here tomorrow, so I can bring them to the new hideout? Rock won't be able to get to us in there—there's a room we can lock ourselves into if the pack members come."

Rip shrugged. "Sure, I could do that. After I bring them to you, you want me to go back to my hiding place and keep tabs on the rest of the animals like I've been doing?"

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. "As long as it doesn't put you in too much danger."

Rip snorted. "Danger? I laugh in the face of danger!"

Saderia grinned and rolled her eyes. "You laugh at everything."

"True." Rip just shrugged and laughed, bringing a smile to her face.

Shaking her head, she forced herself to take on a more serious expression. “Anyway, I’ll spend the next few days plotting how to attack Rock’s prison. I’ll go over strategies with the troops when you bring them, and I’ll tell them more about the prison, so we know what we’re dealing with...It is my house, so I would know it best...” Pushing away her disgust, she let out a sigh. “Even after I come up with some strategies, though, I’ll have to wait for Dash’s signal before I attack. Dash and I are supposed to work together to take down Rock, and I need to get a message to him, but I don’t know how. It’s going to be hard for him to get word to me, too. Right now, he has to make Rock think he’s trustworthy. It won’t help if someone sees him sneaking around or worse, meeting with me...”

“I could bring him a message.”

Saderia froze at the sound of the sudden high-pitched voice and instantly whipped around, her fur bristling in alarm. Behind her, Rip wildly looked around, searching for the source of the strange voice. Nothing moved in the woods around them.

“Oh, relax.” A soft rustling sound followed the annoyed voice, making Saderia whirl around to face a thick bush a few feet away. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw who had spoken. Bunny strolled carelessly out of the undergrowth, brushing leaves out of her dirty black fur. Walking as if on a leisurely stroll, the pup ambled over to them and sat down in front of them, her amber eyes gleaming in the shadows. “It’s only me.”

Saderia gaped at her in shock. “*Bunny?* What are you doing here?”

Beside her, Rip let out an annoyed groan and shot Bunny a furious glare, seeming more angry than surprised. “Not again! Bunny? *What* did I tell you about sneaking around? How many times have I told you not to *do* that?” He lashed his dark red tail furiously back and forth. “When Lightning finds out about this, he’ll have a fit!”

Bunny shot him a cold glare. “Lightning *won’t* find out about this because *you* won’t tell him. Because if you *do* tell him, I’ll rip your eyes out.”

While Rip just growled and rolled his eyes, Saderia blinked in surprise. Raising an eyebrow, she glanced back at Rip and frowned. “She does this often?”

“*Often?*” Rip snorted and rolled his eyes. “She does this *all the time!* She follows me *everywhere!* It’s annoying!”

Bunny sniffed and pointedly turned away from him, narrowing her eyes and lashing her short black tail. Ignoring Rip's annoyed glare, she glanced up at Saderia with calm, cool amber eyes. "Remember me, Princess? I have a proposition for you."

Saderia's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. Where exactly had the pup learned that word and where did that audacity come from? Glancing back and forth between Rip and Bunny, she slowly sat back, deciding to humor her. "Okay...What is this...proposition, Bunny?"

Bunny met her gaze and calmly flicked her tail at Rip. "I heard you and the moron talking." While Rip just rolled his eyes, Bunny's amber irises bored seriously into Saderia's. "You need some way to send a message to that lion guy. I could do it for you."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "What? Are you *insane*?"

Bunny flattened her ears and glared. "No, I'm not insane! It would be easy. I'm small, so I could easily sneak over to the dingo camp, hide, and wait for the lion to wander to the outskirts of camp alone. Then I could slip over to him, whisper your message in his ear, listen to *his* message, and then be off on my merry way. No one would even have to get hurt. Well... unless you want them to. If you do, I can do that, too."

Saderia blinked several times in disbelief, then gritted her teeth and fiercely shook her head. "No. I can't send a pup into enemy territory! It's too dangerous!"

Bunny let out a furious growl. "I'm *not* a pup!" Rage flashed in her amber irises, making Saderia's eyes widen in surprise. Narrowing her eyes, Bunny glared at her, then slowly sat back, curling her tail calmly over her paws. "Well, I mean, I am, but I'm not like other pups. I can handle this. Besides, sending a pup into enemy territory is no more dangerous than sending someone else. It's actually safer for me because I'm smaller."

"No." Saderia firmly narrowed her eyes. "I'm *not* sending a pup into danger. It's not right."

"Who *cares* what's right?" Bunny lashed her tail in exasperation. "How are you ever going to win a war if you do what's 'right'? It's war! You have to do bad things!"

Saderia blinked in surprise. Where had a tiny pup like her gotten all that from? Shaking off her surprise, she narrowed her eyes uncomfortably. As much as she hated to admit it, Bunny did have a point, but she refused to

acknowledge it. She didn't want to defeat an evil dictator by becoming one herself. Frowning, she opened her mouth to protest, then broke off when Rip spoke first. "You know, she's got a point."

Saderia shot him a dark glare. "We can't send a pup into Rock's territory!"

"No, you don't understand." Rip raised an eyebrow. "This pup can *sneak*. She spied on Rock hundreds of times back when we were all living as outcasts. Thunder and her brother tried to stop her, but they both failed. She snuck out of our camp and spied on Rock's camp for *months* and *never* got caught. Trust me, she knows what she's doing."

Bunny raised her head high with pride, shooting Saderia a haughty, knowing smirk.

Saderia narrowed her eyes in indecision, glancing uncertainly between Rip and Bunny. "It's still dangerous...But..." A grudging sigh escaped her throat. "I guess I'll consider it. I won't need to send a message to Dash for at least a few days anyway, so I'll have plenty of time to think about it. In the meantime, Rip, you round up the animals hiding in the woods and bring them here, so they can stay in my hideout. Bunny can stay here with me, too. Now that she's here, it's safer to let her stay than to let her try to sneak back to Lightning. Speaking of Lightning, if you see him, tell him where his sister is."

Rip flicked his tail and shrugged. "Sure. I can do that."

Bunny sneered and leered up at her with knowing amber eyes. "You really don't need to worry about me, Princess Saderia. I'm smarter than you think."

Saderia just sighed and nodded absently, her mind whirling with confusion. All she knew was one thing—Claw had better visit her tonight.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Messages

“Send her.”

Saderia’s eyes opened wide with shock. Claw sat at the top of a misty, light brown sand dune across from her, her light brown eyes calm and serious. A ghostly blue glow tinged her translucent light brown fur and shone over the sleepy dunes of the spirit world around her.

Shock shone in Saderia’s eyes. “You want me to send Bunny into Rock’s camp?”

Claw gave her a calm nod. “Yes. I think she’ll be fine.”

Saderia gaped at her in shock. “But she’s just a pup! She’s too young!”

“Well, technically, you’re rather young yourself.” A faint smile tugged at Claw’s mouth. “Trust me, Saderia, Bunny will be fine. I’ve watched her before. She’s been sneaking around since she was born. In her whole life, she was only ever caught once, and that was when Rock exiled her. Even after she became an outcast, she still kept spying...mainly for lack of anything better to do. One time, she even managed to sneak into Rock’s den, but I doubt she’ll have to do anything like that. If you just send her to Dash, she’ll be fine. Like she said, she could just wait on the outskirts of camp for Dash and whisper the message to him.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes and frowned. “There’s something a little...strange about Bunny, but she is good at sneaking around.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “You think so, too?”

Claw flattened her ears and nodded. “Yes. There’s something about her that kind of...worries me. Still...it doesn’t matter. We need her, and she’s willing to help.”

Saderia let out a heavy sigh. “It just seems wrong.”

Claw’s eyes clouded and darted down to her paws. “I know. But trust me, Saderia, she’ll be fine. She doesn’t even have to go into Rock’s camp.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes, her amber irises gleaming with uncertainty. After a long silence, she let out a defeated sigh. “All right. I’ll send her. I just hope you’re right.”

“Dingo?” Makero’s green eyes widened in shock. “How did you get free?”

“Shh!” Dingo shot him a dark glare, his light brown eyes shadowed and his scarred face grave. “Quiet! You’ll alert the guards if you speak too loudly.”

Makero blinked in shock, then hastily closed his mouth, casting furtive glances at the dark room around him. Shadows covered the prison cell at the end of the hallway—the cell that used to be the King and Queen’s bedroom. Blood covered the carpet and its sick scent curled up into the air, tickling Dingo’s nose. None of the furniture had been touched. The King’s huge bed still sat pressed up against the right wall with tiny tables on either side of it. But the soft carpet had been split apart by four sharp stakes driven into the floor.

Unlike other rooms, the King’s old room was empty except for him. In the center of the room, Makero lay with all four paws tied to the stakes with thick ropes. Dried blood clung to Makero’s filthy orange fur, making it stick up in unkempt clumps. Several deep wounds lined his sides. A grave shadow haunted his face, but a sudden spark of life shone in his eyes at the sight of Dingo. Pricking his ears, Makero listened intently and cast an anxious glance at the dark, closed door, then dropped his voice to a tense whisper. “What is going on?”

Dingo’s eyes flitted toward the door, then returned to Makero’s face, glowing with seriousness. “I’ve been free for a long time, King Makero. The day Rock captured me, he accidentally cut one of the ropes tied around my left paw while he was torturing me. He cut it just enough for me to work my paw out of the ropes, and it didn’t take me long to cut the rest of them. Since then, I’ve only been pretending to be tied up.” He paused, then cast a furtive glance at the door, his eyes shining knowingly in the dim light of the room.

Every six hours, the guards watching the cells switched out with new guards, so the old ones wouldn’t get slack. Usually, when they switched, all the old guards moved outside to wait for the new ones to

arrive a few minutes before they actually showed up. That meant that no guards were stationed in the house for about five or ten minutes every six hours. Two minutes ago, Dingo had left his own 'cell' and had slunk down the left hallway to Makero's cell. A minute had passed since then. That left him anywhere from two to seven minutes to get back to his cell before the new guards came in. Determination glowed in his eyes. He would hardly need that long.

Narrowing his eyes, he gazed at Makero darkly. "I'm going around untying the prisoners while the guards switch out. I know Saderia's going to make a move soon to free us and I want to make it as easy as possible by freeing as many prisoners as I can before she does. *But* I'm only untying prisoners who can handle it." Seriousness darkened his eyes. "When I untie you, you *cannot* run or attack the guards. There are too many, and if you try it, you will be killed. And if you are killed, the guards will know they were tricked and they will realize that other prisoners might be untied. They'll inspect the prisoners, and once they realize that a good many of them are untied, they'll do one of two things. Either they'll tie everyone back up, or they'll turn this prison into a slaughterhouse. If I untie you now, then no matter what they do to you, you must pretend like you're still tied until Saderia arrives. Even if they torture you, you cannot budge. Do you think you can handle that?"

Makero's eyes darkened with determination. "Yes, I can handle it."

"Good." Dingo leaned down to inspect the ropes tied around his paws. The thick ropes were so tight, he could barely see where rope ended and skin began. A shadow crossed his face as he raised a paw. "Don't make a sound. This will only hurt for a minute."

Triumphant howls shattered the peaceful morning air. Screams rang out from every inch of the wide clearing. Blood spattered the soft, dewy grass and filled the air with a thick, metallic stench. Dash sat on the woodsy outskirts of a wide clearing, gazing out at the houses covering the grass of a once peaceful neighborhood. Pack members poured into the devastated clearing from all sides, letting out bloodthirsty howls.

Windows shattered with a sickening crack, sending glass flying to the ground. Doors were yanked off their hinges and tossed aside with a sharp smack. Dingoes raced through the clearing, howling and tearing at

houses to get to the animals inside. Terrified screams echoed around the clearing. Desperate forest animals flew out of their homes and fled to the woods, shrieking in terror. Pack members thundered after them with feral snarls. A few tackled the fleeing animals to the ground seconds before they reached the outskirts of the clearing. Some animals tried desperately to fight back, filling the air with vicious snarls. Pack members tore through the doors of the houses and bounded into the dens. Many reappeared seconds later, dragging hordes of screaming animals. Their blood soaked the grass.

Heat washed over Dash as screams echoed around him. His tail flicked coolly back and forth and his eyes glimmered in the faint light. An eerie calmness haunted his gaze as he watched the dingoes tear the neighborhood apart. At the sound of rough paw steps, he looked up to see several pack members lumbering toward him, dragging along a horde of sobbing animals. All the dingoes stopped in front of him and met his eyes with cool, questioning gazes.

Dash glanced calmly down at the blood-spattered prisoners and lightly flicked his tail, his voice as icy as the morning air. "Tie them up and take them to the questioning chamber in the prison. I'm almost certain outcasts and members of the Princess's army were staying here before, so they might know something about the Princess's whereabouts."

"Yes, Dash." The dingoes dipped their heads, then roughly grabbed the forest animals and carted them away to tie them up. Cries of fear and shock rose up from the filthy animals. All of their eyes darted to Dash's face, glowing with fear and desperation, but he ignored them. What exactly did they expect Rock's Second in Command to do? They didn't have to be so afraid, anyway. After all, this was all for the good of the forest.

His eyes caught on a group of pack members drifting toward him, and he calmly looked up to meet them when they approached. Two of them dragged along a struggling forest animal—a black panther with wide, terrified light blue eyes. Lily. Dash's heart sank with shock and dismay when he recognized her, but he hid the feelings and kept his expression calm and cold.

One of the dingoes grunted and shoved the panther toward him. "She said she knew you."

Lily collapsed in front of him, her eyes wide and her black fur bristling with terror. Blood streaked her face. Shaking with fear, Lily gazed

up at him with wide, terrified blue eyes. “Dash...Dash! What are they going to do to me? You said we’d be safe! At the meeting, you said everyone would be safe! What’s going on?”

Annoyance gleamed in Dash’s eyes and he shot her a dangerous glare, warning her to stop talking. If she said anymore, she would reveal the whole plan! When Lily looked up at him with horrified eyes and clamped her mouth shut, Dash gave her a long, lingering glance, then coolly turned to face the dingoes, apathetically flicking his tail. “I don’t know her. She’s just another piece of forest food who thinks I’ll save her.”

“Right.” One of the dingoes eagerly licked his lips. “Should we...?”

“Throw her in the prison,” Dash replied with a bored flick of his tail. “Not the questioning chamber, just a normal cell. She seems crazy—I doubt she knows anything.”

The dingoes nodded. Without a word, they grabbed Lily and dragged her away, ignoring her screams. Fear gleamed in Lily’s eyes and she shrieked in terror, thrashing desperately against her attackers. Out of the corner of his eye, Dash watched them pull her away, his amber irises shadowed. Nothing too bad would happen to her. Nothing like what happened to Dingo every day. Besides, she would be free soon. Everyone would.

Flicking his tail impatiently, Dash gazed out at the devastated neighborhood and rolled his eyes. All he wanted to do was return to the desert to see what Rock was up to. After leading fifty dingoes to three different neighborhoods since that morning, he felt exhausted. Still, considering he had been allowed to lead the attacks, Rock was probably starting to trust him. At that moment, the Leader was probably lounging around on his den, thinking of new ways to torment Dingo or trying to figure out what to actually do with his new power. Dash longed to return to the desert to think of a way to trick Rock into giving him full control.

It shouldn’t be too difficult. After all, Rock was an idiot. Fooling him couldn’t be too hard.

“All right, everyone, listen up!” Saderia’s voice rang out over the anxious voices of outcasts and forest animals, making all eyes turn to her. Hundreds of army members gathered in the wide room in Dastarius’s house, squishing close to one another to fit. All of them completely filled the room

behind the heavyset double doors, making it impossible to see the filthy, debris-ridden floor. Behind the thick crowd stood a closed door that led to a staircase winding down into Dastarius's dungeon, a door she tried not to look at.

Saderia stood with her back pressed against the locked double doors, facing her army with flashing amber eyes. Hot, musty air filled the room, and with so many bodies competing for space, it was hard to even breathe. A filthy odor rose up from the dirty, dilapidated house. Still, staying in the locked room was the safest option. A thick silence fell over the crowd as every eye turned to Saderia, glinting with determination.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia gazed out at her troops. "Listen up, everyone. Our primary goal now is to free Rock's prisoners. After that, we will attack Rock. But we will not just rush into battle like last time. Right now, Dash is in the dingo camp, waiting to give us some sort of signal. He will set something up that will make Rock more vulnerable, and when he does, we will attack. As soon as we free the prisoners, our main goal will once again be to kill Rock. Once we free the prisoners, some of them will join our army, and our other members in hiding will join us, too. Together, we will defeat him."

One of the outcasts looked up sharply. "What about Dingo? Where is he?"

A grave shadow flitted across Saderia's face. "Dingo is one of Rock's prisoners."

Gasps and cries of shock echoed out around the crowd. Alarm and horror gleamed in the eyes of the outcasts and shadowed the faces of the forest animals.

Saderia held up a paw to silence them. "It's all right. He's alive." Her eyes glowed with fierce determination. "You all know Dingo would never go down without a fight. I guarantee that even now, he's doing something to help the cause. He's probably rallying the prisoners to rebel the moment we set foot in that so-called prison. He might not be in great shape the next time we see him, but he'll fight for us. He will remain strong."

The animals exchanged anxious glances, but a gleam of understanding lit up their eyes. Slowly, they turned back to face Saderia with calm, determined expressions.

She faced them with blazing amber eyes. "I'm going to unlock the doors, and I want everyone to practice fighting wherever you find space. In the house and in the clearing around it. Don't go any farther than the clearing. I want six of you to stand guard on the outskirts and keep watch for Rock's dingoes. If you even *think* you see some, yell to everyone to get back in the house where it's safe. Understand?" When the crowd nodded, she faced them with a determined gaze. "Then let's start practicing. Let's improve as much as possible, so we can make Rock pay and ensure that he never hurts another animal again."

"You're doing well, son." Dastarius's shadowy form appeared close beside Dash. His amber eyes glinted in the harsh, burning light of the desert sun, but his expression remained dark and unreadable. Absently, he gazed up at the enormous rock formation towering above them.

Dash sat near the front of a huge crowd of dingoes gathered around Rock's den. Canines covered the sand and surrounded him on all sides. Each of them gazed up at Rock's monstrous den with glowing eyes. At the top of the ledge, towering far above them, stood Rock. The Leader gazed out at the legions of canines before him and shouted down to his followers, his dusty, dark brown tail lashing in excitement. Sunlight glinted off his monstrous den.

Keeping his gaze trained on the enormous platform, Dash didn't bother to glance back at his father. His calm, bored expression didn't waver and his voice came out as a cold, calm murmur. "It's for the good of the forest. We'll be able to kill Rock soon, won't we?"

Dastarius nodded absently, his gaze trained on the ledge. "Yes. I'm sure the Princess will find some way to contact you soon. After that, your only concern will be to decide exactly when and how to strike. Do you know what you're going to do?"

A faint sneer crept across Dash's face. "Of course. I've been planning it for days." His eyes glowed in the bright light. "First, I'll have to free the prisoners..."

"Correct." Dastarius coolly flicked his tail. "Your friend has inadvertently become the leader of the outcasts and if you're going to win this war, you'll need him. Plus, you might need the other prisoners to fight in your army. How is your friend, by the way?"

“Fine, I guess.” Dash shrugged and cast his father a cool glance out of the corner of his eye. “You tell me. You’re the one who can see everything.”

Dastarius snickered. “True. He’s doing all right. He’s quite good at deceiving idiots like Rock. He’s not dead yet, so that proves he’s tough.” A dangerous glint lit up his eyes. “Of course, out of everyone in the army, he’ll want to kill Rock the most...but that’s your job. Remember he is only a tool in this war meant to help you. Don’t let him steal your job.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.” A blaze of determination lit up Dash’s amber eyes. “Dingo might hate Rock, but it’s not his job to kill him. He doesn’t even want to.”

Dastarius chuckled darkly. “You’d be surprised to realize just how much of the dingoes’ natural murderous instinct rests within him.”

Dash just shrugged apathetically. “Either way, Rock is mine to kill.”

“True.” Dastarius hesitated, then cast a dark glance up at the dusty dark brown Leader. A dark, eerie gleam illuminated his amber eyes, but a grave shadow crossed his face. Narrowing his eyes, he rested his wispy tail tensely on Dash’s shoulder. “Son...You *are* prepared to do *anything* to defeat Rock, aren’t you?”

Dash blinked in surprise and glanced back at him out of the corner of his eye. “Of course I am. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Good.” Dastarius’s shadowed amber eyes bored into his. “But I warn you...you might not like what you’re about to see.”

A bewildered frown spread across Dash’s face. “What are you talking about?”

Dastarius simply raised an eyebrow and flicked his tail toward the ledge towering over him. Dash narrowed his eyes in misunderstanding, then slowly gazed up at the platform.

Atop the enormous ledge, Rock let out a loud, triumphant howl. “We have successfully taken over the forest!” Howls of excitement echoed around the camp, bringing a sneer to the Leader’s face. “We have the entire forest at its knees! The *former* Princess is nowhere to be found, but I doubt it will be long before she makes an appearance.” A bloodthirsty glint lit up his dark brown eyes and he eagerly licked his lips. “And I think I know just how to bring her out of hiding!”

Dash's eyes widened in shock and his heart skipped a beat. What was Rock doing? Dash hadn't told him anything about driving Sadaria out of hiding yet! A dark, uneasy feeling swept over him and his eyes narrowed with unease. What was going on?

Rock gazed down at two dingoes who stood guard at the very bottom of his monstrous den, stationed firmly in front of a jagged slate of rock walled in by jutting spikes. Cruel excitement glittered in the Leader's eyes and he let out a booming howl. "Release the prisoner!"

Overwhelming cold washed over Dash and his eyes grew wide with horror the second the words left Rock's mouth. His heart stopped. More than a week had passed since he had moved into the dingo camp, but never once had he sought out Karenisha. Mainly because searching for her would look suspicious, but also because he hadn't *wanted* to seek her out. He hadn't *wanted* to see what the dingoes had done to her. There was no way he could have smuggled her out of the camp, so seeing her would only cause him pain. Now he wished he *had* searched for her. His head spun and a dark sense of panic rose in his chest. What was about to happen?

The two guards standing beneath Rock's monstrous den pressed against the crumbling slate at the bottom of the giant rock. A rough, grinding sound filled the air as the dogs heaved the slate aside, revealing a shadowy entrance straight into the heart of the rock. Throwing the stone aside, the guards stalked into the dark prison. A second later, an earsplitting shriek split the air, raising all the fur on Dash's back. Sickness rose in his chest when the two guards stepped out of the prison, dragging a bloody tiger. Karenisha.

Dash's blood ran cold. Deafening howls boomed out all around the camp as the two guards threw the Queen down on the sand before the enormous crowd. Pack members roared with excitement and practically leapt up into the air, their eyes gleaming with malice and bloodlust. Their screams echoed in Dash's ears, but he didn't hear a word. All he could do was stare at the Queen's ragged form, his eyes wide and hollow with horror.

Blood spattered the Queen's filthy fur and dozens of grisly wounds were carved into her skin. Her once vibrant orange fur had turned a dull, grimy color that stuck up in clumps of gore. Her ribs poked out of her sides, making her look deathly thin. Her front legs stuck out at gruesome angles—

broken. Her head lay limply between her twisted legs. Shivers wracked her skinny body.

Dash could only stare at the ragged tiger. Horror rose in his chest like a tsunami, sending shivers to every part of his body. The dingoes around him, their wild howls, the gritty sand, the boiling sun—all of it disappeared. His entire body went numb with horror. He forgot he was supposed to be putting on an act. He forgot the forest was in danger. He forgot the fate of Saderia and the forest rested in his paws. All he could think of was his foster mother, splayed out before him, seconds away from death. “Karenisha...”

Dastarius rested a paw firmly on his shoulder, his eyes cold. “I warned you.”

Sickness rose in Dash’s chest and his eyes widened in horror. “We have to...”

“Shh!” Dastarius shot him a warning glare and tightened his cold, wispy grip on his shoulder. “Quiet! She doesn’t stand a chance if you mess this up now!”

Dash’s eyes widened in dismay and he clamped his mouth shut. In the back of his mind, he knew his father was right, but his heart ached with pain. How could he just sit there when Karenisha was suffering right in front of him? Gritting his teeth, he gazed at the Queen and shuddered, then froze when another thought struck him. Alarm shone in his eyes and he frantically whipped around to face Dastarius. “She has Saderia’s Dream sense! She can see you!”

“No, she can’t.” Dastarius calmly met his gaze. “She gave up on Dreams months ago. She can’t have Dreams or see ghosts until she believes in her Dream sense again.”

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise. “So she doesn’t believe in ghosts or Dreams?”

“She may believe in ghosts when she sees you, but unless she believes in her Dream sense, she won’t be able to see real ghosts.” Dastarius’s gaze hardened and his grip tightened on Dash’s shoulder. “Brace yourself, son. It’s about to get worse.”

Fear rose in Dash’s chest and his claws dug deep into the sand. His eyes grew wide with pain as he stared at his foster mother. Weakly, Karenisha tried to lift her head, then gave up and let it fall to the ground.

Pain burned in his heart at the sight. Every part of him longed to help her, but his paws remained frozen in place. Cruel laughter and jeering howls rose up from the pack members all around him, making Dash's blood boil. All he wanted to do was claw their mocking faces off. Dastarius's stern grip on his shoulder was the only thing that kept him from leaping at the nearest dog and taking on the entire pack.

"Relax." Dastarius leaned closer to him and murmured quietly in his ear, his amber eyes glowing darkly. "The forest is still depending on you."

Dash gnashed his teeth together and drove his claws deeper into the sand, struggling to hold himself together. His father was right, but he still felt sick.

Dastarius flicked him sharply with his tail. "Rock's coming. Don't give yourself away."

Dash's eyes widened in alarm and he instantly sat up straighter. At the top of the ledge, Rock leapt off the side of the platform to the closest spike. As he sailed through the air, Dash had just enough time to hope he would miss before he landed on one of the jutting spikes. Smoothly, the Leader leapt from spike to spike until he hit the ground, then paced through the howling crowd toward Dash. Instantly, Dash hid his disgust in a fake expression of calm.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Rock paused in front of him and grinned, his dark brown eyes glowing eagerly. "Pretty good plan, huh? I remember what you said about the Princess predicting what I was going to do, so I found a way to use it to my advantage. We still have to hunt her down, but since that's hard to do, I decided to make her come right to us instead."

Dash raised an eyebrow and tried to look calm. "And how are you going to do that?"

Rock snickered. "I decided we should torture the forest Queen again. Princess will have predicted that I'm going to do it, and since it's her mother, she'll want to stop us, so it will lure her out and make her come right to us. She might even be on her way now!"

Dash studied him with shadowed amber eyes. The idiot looked so disgustingly excited to have come up with his clever plan to use Saderia's powers to his advantage. All Dash wanted to do was grab him and stab him

through his black heart with one of the spikes of his own den. Dastarius's paw on his shoulder was the only thing that kept him frozen in place.

Narrowing his eyes, he faced Rock as calmly as possible and spoke in a voice that sounded steady but skeptical. "I don't think that will work, Rock. If she could predict that you were going to torture her mother, she would also predict that you were doing it to lure her out. She'll know it's a trap and she won't come to us, even if she does want to save her mother. After all, she knew you were hurting her mother all this time, and she never came before because she knew she would be caught. Why would now be any different?"

Disappointment shone in Rock's eyes. "Oh...I guess you're right." He paused, then glanced at Karenisha and sneered. "I still think we should give it a try, though. Even if it doesn't make her come to us, she'll still be upset and it might make her reckless."

Dash opened his mouth to protest, but Dastarius firmly tightened his grip on his shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, Dash saw his father's warning glare and could practically read the words in his eyes. Any more protests, and he would look suspicious.

His heart sank and an overwhelming wave of cold washed over him. There was no way out of this...No amount of smooth words or trickery could talk Rock out of this...Horror burned in his chest, but he forced himself to keep his gaze steady and coolly met Rock's eyes. The words that left his mouth sounded smooth and calm, but in his head, they seemed hollow and cold. "All right, Rock...That sounds like a good plan."

Rock grinned and a dark gleam lit up his eyes. "Good." Whirling around, he stalked toward Karenisha and leered at her. "Hey, forest Queen! Look what I've got!"

Weakly, Karenisha started to lift her head. Her dull, bloodshot amber eyes slowly flicked up to look at Rock and the dark, stony lion beside him. The instant her gaze fell on Dash, her eyes opened wide with shock and an ear-piercing scream tore out of her throat. Her paws scrambled frantically against the ground, as if she was trying to run, and her eyes stretched wide with terror. Her wild screams echoed through the camp. Heavy pants shook her sides as she stared at him. Shivers raced through her body and frightened tears pricked her eyes. "G-ghost!" she choked out, her

voice hoarse. “Ghost!” Her eyes were focused intently on Dash...not Dastarius.

Horror rose in Dash’s chest and his paws shook. His ears flattened and he gritted his teeth, struggling to hold himself together. A shiver raced down his spine at the sight of her pale, horror-struck face. Karenisha must still think he was dead...and now she thought she was seeing his ghost. Pain rose in his chest. All he could do was sit still and watch...

Karenisha buried her face in her paws, shaking with fear. “Make it go away! Dash is dead! *Dash is dead!*” Sobs drowned her words as she huddled in on herself to hide.

Dash felt sick as he stared at the former proud Queen, his expression hollow.

Rock curled his lip. “He’s not dead, you stupid piece of food! He’s on my side!”

Karenisha buried her face deeper into her dirty paws and didn’t respond. Whimpers of pain and fear breathed out of her chest and her sides heaved with shaky pants. Shivers raced through her and her entire body trembled violently.

Rock snorted and gazed down at her with a condescending sneer. Fiery hot rage boiled in Dash’s blood at the sight of the revulsion on Rock’s face and his claws drove so deep into the sand that they slashed into his own paw pads. For the first time, he understood why one would want to push someone into the Snake Pit. No death would ever be justice enough for Rock. Even as hatred burned in his heart, his expression remained cool and calm.

The dusty dark brown Leader snickered, then turned and gazed around at the crowds of dingoes surrounding Karenisha, trapping her in a tight circle. Evil excitement shimmered in Rock’s dark eyes. “Who wants to be the one to torture her?”

Eager howls instantly erupted from the pack. Dingoes leapt into the air, practically panting with excitement. All of them crowded closer to the Queen, clamoring to be the one to do it. Dash stared out at the gruesome fray with calm amber eyes and said nothing, but disgust rose in his heart at the sight of the dingoes screaming for the Queen’s blood. How had Dingo lived in this place for twelve years? Pain rose in his heart and his mind whirled with panic. He couldn’t watch this. Even if he couldn’t escape, he

wouldn't look. He would claw his own eyes out before he watched this gruesome show. Only when Dastarius nudged him in the side did a horrible wave of understanding crash over him.

Flattening his ears, he whipped around to face his father, his eyes desperate and pleading.

A grave shadow covered Dastarius's face and his voice dropped to a stern growl. "You promised you would do whatever it took to defeat Rock and save the forest."

Dash blinked in horror and slowly turned back to stare at Karenisha, his entire body numb and cold and his face twisted with pain.

Dastarius leaned close to him and growled. "The forest needs a strong leader to save them. One who knows that sacrifices must be made for the good of the forest."

A horrifying sense of understanding rose in Dash's chest, making the color drain out of his face. In the back of his mind, he knew what he had to do. He couldn't save Karenisha, but he couldn't let any of the cruel dogs get their paws on her either. Taking a deep breath, he squeezed his eyes shut and made himself step forward. Keeping his gaze cool and his voice as steady as possible, he faced Rock and let out a cold growl. "I'll do it."

Surprise shone in Rock's eyes. All around camp, the eager howls of the pack members died away to a tense, stunned silence. Every dingo whipped around to face him in shock. Turning, Rock stared at him with stunned dark brown irises, then slowly narrowed his eyes in a cold sneer. The corners of his mouth curled up in a dark, bloodthirsty grin and a low growl rumbled in his throat. "Looks like you really have changed sides."

Dash nodded darkly and slowly stalked into the wide circle of dingoes, ignoring the stares of the dogs around him. Keeping his expression empty and cold, he stopped in front of Karenisha and stared down at her with dark, grave amber eyes. "Can I, Leader Rock?"

Rock snickered, his dark brown eyes gleaming with delight. "Of course. Make it bloody and violent. Put on a great, bloody show for the Princess to see in her dreams."

"Of course, Rock." Dash narrowed his eyes at the shivering form of Karenisha and forced himself to push away his guilt. "I'll make it as violent as I can."

Beneath him, Karenisha slowly lifted her head, her eyes gleaming with fear. Pain shone in her weak gaze and her body shook with terror. Her pleading amber eyes met his.

“This is a nightmare,” she whispered.

Dash met her gaze with dark, shadowed amber eyes, his expression emotionless and his voice a cold, soft whisper. “Yes, Karenisha. Yes, it is.”

“Dingo...” A light spirit gazed down at the sleeping canine, her light brown eyes bright with pain. Her gaze trailed over his bloody wounds and she squeezed her eyes shut, her paws trembling. When she tried to speak, her voice quivered with misery. “Dingo... you’ve got to get rid of Rock. You can’t let anyone else get hurt.” Her eyes clouded with pain. “I can’t watch anyone else get hurt, not when I can’t do anything to help them. You have to save them all. Please. I don’t know what to do anymore. Please save them...somehow.” Tears glimmered in her eyes. “I don’t want to watch anyone suffer anymore.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she buried her wispy face in her brother’s shoulder and tried to fight back tears. She had never visited Dingo directly before, but she couldn’t stop herself now. She didn’t want to be in the spirit world where the only thing she could do was sit back and watch her friends get hurt. She didn’t want anyone else to suffer. She didn’t want anyone else to die. She didn’t want anyone else to endure the pain of knowing their loved ones were gone. All she wanted was to curl up next to her brother for comfort, like old times. Gritting her teeth, she buried her face deep into her brother’s bloody fur.

A soft paw suddenly brushed her shoulder, making her jump in surprise. Her eyes widened in shock when she found herself staring right into Dingo’s milky brown eyes. Weakly, he raised his head to face her and lifted a bloody paw to place it gently on her shoulder even though he could barely feel it. A dreamy smile crossed his face as he stroked her ghostly shoulder. Her brother gazed into her light brown eyes and smiled.

“Don’t worry, Claw. I won’t let them hurt you anymore. I won’t let anybody hurt you ever again.”

Determination glowed in Bunny’s amber eyes. Keeping her long, rabbit-like ears flattened back, she gazed out at the sand dunes around her.

Harsh sunlight beat down on the desert, making waves of heat rise up from the sand. The pleasant warmth made her eyes light up with a fiery gleam. She lay on her belly at the top of a tall dune, watching the desert carefully. Absently, she grabbed a bit of sand and sprinkled it over her head to hide her dark fur. A thick layer of sand already coated her tiny body, making it easy to blend in. Her eyes flicked eagerly from dune to dune, searching for any sign of movement.

In the distance, a flutter of movement caught her eye. A sneer crossed her face when she peered at a faraway sand dune and saw a crowd of animals padding over the top of it. Three dingoes—two dark brown and one yellow—stalked through the sand, chuckling to themselves. In the middle of the group of canines was a dark brown lion with a darker brown mane and glowing amber eyes. Prince Dash, the lion Princess Saderia had sent her to find. A triumphant grin curled up the corners of her mouth.

Excitement glowed in her eyes. She had found him. Now all she had to do was find a way to talk to him alone. The pup remained rigidly still and watched soundlessly as the crowd padded right past her hiding place, their backs turned to her. A sneer spread across her face when one of the dingoes let out a jeering snarl. The burly dogs didn't scare her. After all, the dingoes in front of her would soon be dead. As soon as the battle started, Rock's followers would be killed. Her eyes gleamed with triumph at the thought.

Shaking the sand out of her fur, she crouched down low and raced after them, never making a sound. From the way the canines' eyes darted around the dunes, she could tell they were part of a hunting party. If they were hunting, Dash wouldn't lose the others until he returned to the camp. Generally, the only time anyone left the group on a hunting trip was if they were chasing a fast piece of prey. A reckless idea kindled in the back of her mind.

Tearing her eyes off the group, she darted up the side of a nearby sand dune and disappeared on the other side. The party vanished from sight. On nimble feet, she weaved through the dunes in front of her, moving parallel to the direction the hunting party had been moving. Her small body slipped easily between the tall dunes. Not even the best hunter could have seen her. With gleaming amber eyes, she bounded up the side of a nearby sand dune and skidded to a halt at the top. Dash and the dingoes appeared a

few feet below her. All of the dingoes seemed to be peering off to the left, while Dash gazed absently ahead.

A grin spread across Bunny's face. Licking her lips, she crouched down, then shot down the side of the dune and raced right past Dash. Her paws moved so quickly that all he saw was a quick flash of black fur. Dash's eyes widened in surprise. When Bunny ducked behind a nearby dune, she heard one of the dingoes let out a shout. "There goes a rabbit! Catch it, Dash!"

Paw steps thundered behind her. Smirking, she glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Dash bound to the top of the dune she had hidden behind. Just Dash. Alone. A sneer curled up the corners of her mouth. Too easy. Without a word, she whipped around and darted away from him, giving him just enough time to see her streaking away. Instantly, the dark lion raced after her, weaving through dozens of dunes in pursuit. Racing in between sand dunes, Bunny led him a good few yards away from the other pack members, then abruptly skidded to a halt and whipped around to face him, sending sand flying up all around her.

With a yelp of surprise, Dash instantly skidded to a halt right in front of her. His eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in shock when he saw her face. "*Bunny?*"

Bunny grinned and waved a paw. "Hi...Dash, is it?"

Dash blinked several times and stared down at her in disbelief. "What...what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be with your brother in the forest?"

Bunny raised an eyebrow. "Uh, no." Before Dash could say any other stupid things, she coolly flicked her tail. "Your friend, Saderia, sent me here to give you a message."

Dash's eyes widened in incredulity. Sneering at his bewildered expression, Bunny studied him thoughtfully. As she inspected his stunned face, though, a strange sense of wonder tickled her paws. A frown spread across her face. There was something...strange about him. An eerie, barely visible shadow seemed to cloak him like a cape, giving him an otherworldly appearance. Intently, she studied his face, then felt surprise burn in her chest when she realized there wasn't something strange *about* him, but something strange *beside* him. A dark, nearly invisible shadow floated right next to him, faceless and indistinguishable. But it was there. Her ears pricked and

when she listened intently, she swore she heard a low, dark voice whisper, “I told you the Princess would find some way to contact you.”

A deep frown crossed her face. What the heck? Hiding her confusion, she said nothing and instead looked up to face Dash, frowning when she realized he had spoken. Putting on a cool look, she steadily met his gaze. “What was that? Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

Dash blinked several times, then absently shook his head. “Never mind. What was the message?”

Bunny smirked, then sat up straighter. “Saderia wanted me to tell you that she has nearly all of her troops battle-ready. She wants to know when to free the prisoners. In case you didn’t know, she also wanted to tell you that the prison is a den that used to be her house. Another thing she wants to know is if you’ve made any progress in getting Rock to trust you. Oh, and she wants to know when the battle should commence.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in bewilderment, then slowly shook his head. Sitting back, he cautiously met her gaze and gave her a slow smile. “Tell Saderia I’ve made great progress. Tell her to free the prisoners in two days at *exactly* midnight. No sooner, no later. Tell her to free the captives within one hour, then have her run straight to the desert. But when she gets to the desert, she shouldn’t immediately attack. Tell her to have her troops wait just outside the camp for a few minutes. Within an hour, Rock will run into camp unprotected. Tell her she should strike the moment she sees Rock and do everything she can to kill him.”

Bunny nodded firmly. “Can do.” Flicking her tail, she rose to her paws and started to turn, calling a few words over her shoulder. “Good luck and take care.” She started to walk away, then paused and glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes stared directly at the dark mist floating beside Dash and a wry smile spread across her face. “You, too.”

Dash’s eyes widened in shock. Blinking in alarm, he gazed rapidly back and forth between the dark shadow and her, his eyes wide with confusion. Maybe he could see it, too.

Sneering, Bunny started to turn, then looked back one last time. With a smirk, she glanced at Dash and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, and Dash?” When he looked back at her in surprise, she sneered. “You should wash your paws more often. You have blood in your claws.”

Drip. Drip. Drip. Dingo lay on the cold wooden floor, his head flat on the ground and his gaze dull. Idly, his eyes followed a stream of blood trickling down his muzzle and dripping onto the floor. Rock paced in front of him, sneering at him with cruel dark brown eyes and an evil smirk. The dusty dark brown Leader paced around him, going through his daily routine of insulting him, telling him how worthless he was, and threatening to make him suffer. None of it seemed particularly interesting, so Dingo drowned him out.

In the background, he could hear the impatient thud of paw steps. On the other side of the room, Dash paced anxiously back and forth, his face unreadable but his steps brisk. After three hours of standing around watching him be tortured, the poor guy was probably bored out of his mind and eager for a change of scenery, having had nothing to do. He had only gotten to torture Dingo for an hour or so before Rock had taken over.

A soft sigh escaped Dingo's chest. He really hoped that wherever Claw happened to be, she wasn't watching this. Rock's torture had become more of an annoyance than anything, but his little act might be good enough to convince his sister he was dying. A shadow flitted across his face and his eyes narrowed with a dark sense of determination. Soon, he would make sure his sister didn't have to suffer. If Rock was gone, all the pain she hated seeing would be gone. Bad guy or not, he would be the one to end Rock's life.

Rock muttered something Dingo didn't bother to listen to. With a chuckle, Rock smacked him across the face, then stalked away. Dash looked up with unreadable amber eyes, then moved aside to let Rock step into the dark left hallway. Dash's eyes narrowed to slits when Rock stepped past him and vanished into the darkness. A dangerous glint lit up Dash's amber eyes and a shadow crossed his face. Shaking his mane out over his eyes, he stalked away from the hallway and sat back a few paces away from Dingo. His mane shadowed most of his face, but when Dingo looked up at him, he could make out an eerie sneer on his face.

Dingo raised an eyebrow and nudged him. "What are you so happy about?"

Dash flicked him sharply with his tail and shot him a warning look out of the corner of his eye, but never turned to face him. Dingo just shrugged and laid his head back on his paws.

“It’s coming.” Dingo’s ears pricked up at the sound of Dash’s soft, cool voice. Cutting his eyes to the side, he glanced at Dash. The dark lion didn’t look at him and kept his gaze locked on the wall, but after a moment of silence, he let his eyes slide to the side to meet Dingo’s gaze. “Is there anything you can do to help the prisoners prepare?”

A faint smile spread across Dingo’s face and his eyes shone. “Already done.”

Moonlight shone through the shadowy canopy of leaves, turning Saderia’s dirty orange fur silver. Tense silence hung over the dark woods. Shadows flitted across the wild grass and danced across the thick trees surrounding her. Determination flashed in her eyes. Flattening her ears, she crept silently through the dense undergrowth, not making a sound. Behind her, hundreds of forest animals and outcasts slunk behind her, creeping around trees and weaving past bushes without a sound. An eerie, determined light glowed in their eyes and their faces were hard with conviction. As one, the army slunk through the woods. Their bodies moved like darting shadows. Creeping through the darkness, Saderia paused beside a gnarled tree and gazed out at the clearing in front of her, her eyes glowing in the faint light.

Her house stood black against the darkness of night. Moonlight dappled the dense trees all around it, but the house remained shadowed. A bleak, sinister prison...no longer a home. Saderia’s eyes flashed and she raised her tail to signal for the animals behind her to pause. Her army slunk up behind her and peered out through the trees and leafy branches, their eyes glowing with courage. Several canine guards sat all around the perimeter of her house, their eyes shadowed and menacing. Dozens of other guards waited inside.

Saderia’s eyes narrowed and she let out a cool, eerie hiss. “You picked the wrong animal to mess with, Rock. After tonight, you’ll never hurt another animal again.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Final Battle

Stars twinkled in the black desert sky, casting an eerie glow down on the silent dingo camp. Moonlight glinted off the jagged stones of Rock's monstrous den and shadows danced across the brutal spikes beneath the platform. Dash sat on the edge of the ledge, his tail flicking coolly back and forth. An unreadable expression shadowed his face. Absently, he gazed up at the darkening sky with glowing amber eyes, then lowered his head to stare down at the camp. Hundreds of dingoes padded silently through the camp, murmuring to their neighbors or taking a drink from the water trough. An eerie calm seemed to hang over the entire camp, as if everyone was waiting for something. Or maybe it was just him.

A chill washed over Dash. Out of the corner of his eye, he could make out a shadowy figure creeping up behind him, but he didn't bother to look back.

"Just a few more hours, son," Dastarius murmured, his voice cool and soft. "Use your time wisely."

Dash just nodded and kept his gaze trained on the crowds milling around below him. A shadow flitted across his face and his eyes darkened. In just a few hours, the silent camp would burst into a wild, bloody frenzy. The battle was fast approaching. The battle that would change everything. Narrowing his eyes, he tore his gaze off the shadowy camp and glanced over his shoulder when he heard the sound of quiet paws steps.

Rock padded out of his dark den at the end of the platform, yawning and shaking out his dusty dark brown fur, as if to wake himself up. Creeping past the stones forming the archway of his den, the Leader lazily looked up and held up his tail in greeting. "Dash."

"Rock," Dash murmured, his voice cool. His eyes flicked back to the dark camp when Rock stepped up beside him. The Leader stood on his left, gazing at the camp with glinting brown eyes. Silence spread out between them. Dash kept his gaze trained on the camp, not once looking at

Rock or saying a word. In just a few hours, the tyrant beside him would be dead. He desperately hoped he would be dead. Letting his mane fall over his face, Dash cut his eyes to the side and saw Dastarius hovering beside him, a curious gleam in his amber eyes. A faint sneer crept across his face. He hadn't told Dastarius about his plan, and now his father was the one anxious to understand. Now Dash was in charge. He was the one making plans.

After a long silence, Dash slowly turned to face Rock, his gaze calm and steady. "I've been thinking about your plan to lure Princess Saderia out of hiding by using her mother."

Rock raised an eyebrow and glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Oh?"

"I think it might have worked to some degree." Dash flicked his tail and gazed down at the camp with calculating amber eyes. "You've made the Princess reckless. She'll want to do anything to kill you now. That fact shouldn't worry you. After all, she's just forest food. There's no way she could beat you. But still, she probably believes she can. Only now she'll be more reckless about it." He turned and met Rock's gaze with calm, knowing eyes. "I think you might have a good chance of capturing the Princess if you go to the forest today. You should go to the forest alone and head to the meeting place. There, you should sit back and wait. Saderia will predict that you would have gone there alone, and eventually she'll show up to face you, thinking she can beat you if you're by yourself. She'll want to kill you because of what you did to her mother, and she'll think she'll be able to. But she won't."

His amber eyes glittered in the darkness. "As soon as you leave camp, *I* will send several dingoes to follow you to the clearing. If I send them after you're gone, she won't see it coming because she won't try to predict what I'll do. The dingoes will follow you to the clearing and hide. Princess Saderia will show up to attack, never knowing her enemies are hiding all around her. From there, you can take her prisoner or kill her, whichever you prefer."

Rock's eyes lit up with excitement. "That's *genius*! When should I go?"

Dash frowned thoughtfully. "Hmm...I would say now, actually. Right now, the Princess is probably still upset and not thinking clearly, but

if you wait too long, she'll regain her senses and realize it's too risky. The wound is still fresh right now, enough to make her reckless in her desire for revenge. We need to use that against her."

Rock nodded thoughtfully, his eyes shining with eagerness. "I suppose that's a good idea. So when exactly will you send the dingoes after me?"

Dash flicked his tail. "Just as soon as you leave camp. That way, you won't see them following you. As long as you don't see them following you, neither will Princess."

"That's genius!" An excited smirk crossed Rock's face and his tail twitched eagerly. "How long will I be gone? Will you be able to look after the desert while I'm gone?"

Dash nodded solemnly. "Of course. I think it will take you about three hours to get to the forest's meeting place. Once you get there, you should stay for *at least* one hour—to give her time to show up. If she doesn't show up by then, just leave. While you're at the forest, you should check on the prison, too, before you leave. I'll watch the camp while you're gone."

"Excellent." A cruel sneer curled up Rock's mouth. "If we kill the Princess, we'll have *everything*. If you're right about this, I'll even let you keep being Second in Command. We'll rule the forest *and* the desert. You can do the thinking, since you're good at that."

A cool grin crossed Dash's face. "Sounds good, Rock." His eyes flicked back to the camp and he lightly flicked his tail. "As soon as you leave the camp, I'll announce our plan to the pack and pick out a few dingoes to follow you. I'll only announce the plan once you're out of earshot. That way, Princess will have no idea what's going on."

"Good." Sneering triumphantly, Rock whipped around and leapt off the platform to the first spike. "See you in a few hours!" Without another word, the Leader bounded to the next spike and lunged from outcropping to outcropping until he reached the ground.

Dash's eyes flicked coolly back to the camp below him and he watched with a cold gaze as Rock bounded across the sand. A faint sneer curled up the corners of his mouth. A chill swept over him from behind, but Dash kept his gaze trained on the camp.

Dastarius stepped up beside him and gazed down at him with a cool, proud gleam in his eyes. “Nicely done, son. I’m curious to see where you’re going with this.”

A smirk crossed Dash’s face. “Just watch. If all goes according to plan, the battle will be short and quick. All we have to do now is wait.”

“**Attack!**” A deafening roar tore out of Saderia’s throat and echoed through the forest. Leaping to her paws, she dove into the clearing past the shadowed trees and low-hanging branches, a vicious snarl tearing out of her throat. An earsplitting cacophony of screams and howls erupted behind her. The woods came alive with animals. Army members streamed out of the dense forest after her, their paws pounding the ground with a sound louder than an earth-shattering crack of thunder.

All around her house, the guards looked up in shock. With eyes wide with disbelief, the pack members leapt up to fight, but moved too late. Deafening howls of alarm echoed around the house. At the head of her army, Saderia bared her fangs and leapt at a guard, letting out a vicious snarl. The guard whipped around in terror, but before he could move, Saderia slammed into him, sending him tumbling to the ground. In an instant, her army clashed with the guards all around her with an ear-shattering roar. Forest animals and outcasts lunged at the pack dogs and slammed into them with a deafening crack.

A furious hiss escaped her throat as she slammed the guard against the ground. The dark brown canine gazed up at her in shock and instantly whipped his claws across her face. Hissing furiously, Saderia jerked back. Paws slammed into her chest, sending her stumbling blindly backward. Blood trickled past her eyes, but she blinked it away and whipped around just in time to see her enemy lunge at her, a vicious gleam in his eyes. Saderia’s eyes flashed with rage. Baring her fangs, she ducked to avoid the attack, then whipped around when the dingo sailed over her head. The instant he landed, she whipped her claws across his face and lunged to dig her fangs deep into his leg. A loud howl of pain tore out of his throat.

Screams boomed out all around her, ringing in her ears. Outcasts and forest animals lashed out at the guards, dancing furiously across the ground. Blood rose in the thick air and an overwhelming sense of heat seemed to erupt from the heart of the battle. Animals tumbled past her on

all sides, screaming and snarling in fury. Earsplitting howls erupted from inside her house. Guards poured out of the front door in droves and leapt at her army members, letting out wild cries and howls. Not wasting a second, her troops lunged toward the pack members the second they raced out the door, letting out furious cries.

Flattening her ears, Saderia ducked when her enemy lashed out at her face, then raked her claws across his leg. When he winced, she lashed out again and struck his chest. Desperately, the pack member flashed his claws out, ripping a gash across her cheek. Pain stung her face, but she ignored it. Not stopping, she lashed out at his face, then lunged at him when he stumbled back. With a snarl, she slammed her paws into his shoulders and shoved him to the ground. Before he could fight, she drove her claws into his paws and pinned him down. A feral snarl rumbled in her throat and her eyes blazed with fury.

The dingo stared up at her with eyes wide with terror. “Wh-what do you want?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “I want my friends back.” Gritting her teeth, she smacked her claws across his face, then stepped back to let him up when a loud howl of pain tore out of his chest. Instantly, the pack member stumbled to his paws and turned to race away as fast as he could move, his sides heaving with fearful pants. Shoving past crowds of fighting animals, he darted toward the woods, letting out a loud howl.

With a dangerous glare, Saderia watched him vanish into the woods, her eyes blazing. New strength flowed through her battered body and fury burned in her heart, pumping fire through her veins. Whipping around, she stared up at the walls of the prison and let out a deafening shout. “Free the prisoners! Fight the guards! Don’t let them win!”

“**Now!**” Dingo let out a thunderous howl and tore the frayed ropes off his paws. Guards poured into the room from the hallways behind him, streaming toward the door. Baring his fangs, Dingo leapt to his paws just as the pack members whipped around to face him, their eyes wide with shock. Without hesitating, Dingo let out a dangerous growl and lunged at the nearest guard, his claws outstretched. Terror shone in the pack member’s eyes and he desperately tried to dodge, but Dingo smacked into his shoulders before he could move. With a loud yelp of alarm, the guard

tumbled to the ground. Digging in his claws, Dingo slammed him against the bloody wood floor and drove his fangs into his neck.

Howls of fury erupted from the guards. Baring their fangs, they raced at Dingo, making him look up sharply, his fangs dripping with blood. Before any could attack him, an otherworldly cacophony of screams and howls burst out from every inch of the house, shaking the den and freezing the guards in place. Paws thundered against the hard wooden floor just out of sight. Scarred forest animals and outcasts thundered down the hallways, letting out wild, furious screams. Shock gleamed in the guards' eyes. Before any of them could react, the blood-soaked prisoners lunged toward them and crashed into them with a thunderous slam.

Shrieks of fear and anger shattered the air and rocked the entire house. Guards and prisoners lunged at each other and tumbled across the blood-spattered floor, filling the front room with a screeching, furious crowd. Guards and prisoners raced from every corner of the house. Doors flew open and smacked the walls all along the hallways. Forest animals and outcasts raced through the archways, howling with rage. Hundreds of animals poured into the front room, lunging at their enemies. Overwhelming heat washed over the fighters as animals packed into the room, snarling and lashing out. The entire house erupted in battle.

Triumph glowed in Dingo's eyes and a wry smile curled up his mouth. Snickering to himself, he glanced at the guard he had pinned, then instantly leapt away when the dingo whipped his claws at his face. The dog lunged after him with a feral snarl. Moving quickly, Dingo dodged away, nearly slamming into a crowd of fighters behind him. The guard soared past him and nearly smacked into a forest animal before he caught himself and whipped around. Before Dingo could attack, the dog lunged and drove his fangs into his leg.

A deafening howl of pain tore out of Dingo's throat. Gritting his teeth, he yanked his scarred leg away from the pack member, sending him staggering back with a cry. Blood poured down his leg, but Dingo ignored the pain. Baring his fangs, he lashed out at the enemy's face, then ripped open a gash across his chest when he winced. Letting out a snarl, the pack member tried to claw at him, but Dingo leapt to the side before he could strike. Just barely catching himself, he slashed the guard's front legs, swiping them out from under him. A loud yelp escaped the dingo's chest as

he plummeted to the floor, but before he hit the ground, Dingo dove toward him and drove his fangs into the back of his neck.

Using all of his strength, he grabbed the dingo, then swung around and flung him away from him as hard as he could. Shock gleamed in the pack member's eyes. A howl tore out of his throat as he soared through the air, then cut off abruptly when he smacked into a tall, wooden file cabinet with a painful crack. His body tumbled to the ground, but the file cabinet rocked unsteadily away from the wall. Before the guard could move, the enormous cabinet collapsed on top of him with a crack like a thunderclap. The second it hit the ground, the wood splintered, burying the dingo in a heap of mangled boards.

Ear-shattering cracks echoed around the house. A deafening shriek erupted near the right hallway as a forest animal flew through the air and slammed into a wooden desk on the back wall of the room. The animal slumped to the ground seconds before the table collapsed on top of her, its wood shattering at the impact. The computer on the table flew to the ground and smacked the wooden floor, breaking into a hundred tiny shards. Sparks rose up from the destroyed remains. A chair flew out over the heads of the animals trapped in the thick crowd of fighting in the front room. Dingo ducked just in time. The fanciful chair soared over his head and smacked into the front wall with a deafening crack, shattering into a million wooden splinters.

Dingo's eyes narrowed and a dangerous glint shone in his eyes. "Fight back!" he howled, raising his voice to be heard. "Free the other prisoners! Fight the guards!"

Determined shouts rose up from the blood-spattered prisoners. Gritting his teeth, Dingo dove into the thick fray, shoving past crowds of fighting animals. Screams boomed in his ears and the thick scent of blood curled around him, tainting the air. Weaving through thick, tightly-packed fights and ignoring the vicious snarls of the pack members lashing out at him, Dingo dove through the cracked archway of Saderia's house into the dining room.

Shattered chairs lay all across the floor, their splintered pieces littering the entire room. Pack members and prisoners alike raced through the blood-spattered dining room. Groups of fighting animals tumbled across the room on the left side of the gold dining table. Guards lashed out at their

enemies, while the prisoners fought back, their howls ringing with vengeance. On the right side of the table, a small panther was still tied to the ground. Fear blazed in her light blue eyes and she struggled desperately against the tight binds, fighting to free herself. Animals thundered past her on all sides, threatening to trample her.

Dingo's eyes narrowed. Gritting his teeth, he shoved past the crowds and lunged toward the scared panther. Her terrified blue eyes shot to his face the instant he skidded to a stop in front of her. Not wasting a second, he drove his fangs into the ropes tied around her paws. The instant her legs were free, he grabbed the panther's paw. A cry of surprise escaped her throat, but Dingo ignored it. Hastily, he pulled her to her paws and pushed her toward the wall. Seconds later, an earsplitting crack rang in the air as one of the guards threw a prisoner into the table. With a raw groan, the solid gold table toppled over and smacked the place where the panther had laid with an earth-shaking crack that dented the floor.

Shock and terror shone in the panther's eyes. Letting out a shaky gasp, she instantly whipped around and raced toward the front room as fast as she could, heading toward the front door in a desperate attempt to flee. "Thank you," she choked out, not bothering to look back before diving into the fray and stumbling toward the door.

Determination blazed in Dingo's eyes. Tearing his gaze off the fleeing panther, he whipped around and gritted his teeth when another deafening crash sounded above the screams. Only splintered wood remained where a gorgeous railing between the dining room and the kitchen had once stood. Guards and prisoners swarmed into the tiny kitchen. With a deafening scream, an outcast was thrown into the air. The sound of breaking pots and shattering glass rang in the air as he flew onto the counters, shattering everything. Broken glass littered the ground. Another shriek split the air when a pack member flew across the room and smacked into the refrigerator with a sickening crack. A groan filled the air seconds before the refrigerator collapsed, its doors cracking at the impact. Wall cabinets tumbled to the ground and dishes flew all across the room, shattering against the walls.

Dingo let out a booming howl. "Don't give up! Fight for the cause! For freedom!"

“Find a way into the house!” Saderia’s amber eyes blazed and she bared her fangs in determination. “Get into the house and help the prisoners!”

All around her, her army roared with determination and pressed closer to the house, cutting down any guards in their way. Pack members raced away from the battle in droves, trailing blood behind them and howling in pain. Only a few remained to fight off the invaders. Other pack members poured out of the house to fight off her army, but from the terror in their eyes, she could tell that they knew this wasn’t a fight they could win.

Animals clashed around her with furious shrieks. Slashing at a fleeing pack dog, Saderia shoved her way to the front. A thick crowd of fighting surrounded the front door, making it impossible to get through. Pack members desperately drove her army back, trying to keep them out. Fury blazed in Saderia’s eyes and a growl rumbled in her throat.

“Rip!” Whipping around, she gazed out through the bloody haze of fighting animals around her. Her eyes instantly landed on the bright red dingo. Blinking blood out of his eyes, Rip let out a growl and raked his claws across an enemy’s face. When the dingo stumbled away, he tore his claws across the dog’s chest and shoved him to the ground. Desperately, the pack member stumbled to his paws and raced away, howling with fear. Panting heavily, Rip gritted his teeth and looked up to meet her eyes. Blood streaked down his muzzle and several ghastly wounds covered his body, but a fierce light shimmered in his yellow eyes.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and raised her voice to be heard over the ear-piercing screams of battle. “Break the windows! Get our army inside!”

A wild grin crossed Rip’s face and he nodded eagerly. Instantly, he grabbed a rock lying in the blood-spattered grass, then hurled it at the closest window. A thunderous crack erupted from the window as the glass shattered into a million pieces. Broken shards of glass poured onto the ground. Outcasts and forest animals instantly raced toward the broken window and leapt past the broken, jagged shards of glass with loud snarls, disappearing into the house.

Moonlight danced in Saderia’s burning eyes. Turning, Rip met her gaze when she rose her voice to a thundering shout. “Rip, take half the army with you and race around the house! Break every window you can and

send some of our troops in from every angle! Have them find all the prisoners and free them, then help drive out the guards! Got it?"

Rip nodded quickly. Whirling around, he let out a deafening howl and raced around the side of the house. Forest animals and outcasts broke away from their battles to follow him, roaring with determination. Gritting her teeth, Saderia tore her eyes off the crowd and whipped around just in time to see a pack member soar toward her. With a cry, she leapt away, then winced when the dingo landed in front of her and raked his claws across her face. His claws slashed at her legs, but she leapt away before he could unbalance her. Landing clumsily on her paws, she whipped around and ducked when the enemy aimed a blow at her face. Keeping low to the ground, she drove her fangs into his leg, then jerked her head up and snapped his leg out to the side, tasting blood. Ignoring his howl of pain, she dropped his leg and raked her claws across his face, forcing him to stagger backward.

Determination shone in her eyes as the dog vanished into the wild, bloody fray. "Keep fighting! We're winning! We're driving them out!" Moonlight glinted in her eyes and fire danced in their amber depths. "We'll make sure they never hurt another one of my friends! Never again!"

"Makero!" Dingo leapt into the living room and froze in the archway. Dingoes and forest animals swarmed the once cozy room, snarling in fury. The forest King fought against a burly pack member near the back wall, his eyes blazing with determination. With an echoing roar, he lashed out at the guard with quick swipes of his thick claws, but the pack member dodged his attacks and whipped his claws across his face, driving him back. Other fighters swarmed through the room, blocking Makero from sight.

Blood splattered the carpet. Guards and prisoners danced across the floor, lashing out at each other with furious snarls. Screams boomed from the rooms behind him and shrieked from the one around him. One of the forest animals kicked at a guard, sending him tumbling helplessly backwards. With a sharp crack, he smacked against a regal bookshelf that rocked from the impact. Instantly, the shelf toppled over, sending books and papers flying everywhere. With a brutal crack, the bookshelf smacked the ground, its wood splintering and caving in. Books flew all over the room

and papers fluttered down over the fighters' heads. One of the heaviest texts sent one of the guards tumbling dizzily to the ground.

A sudden high-pitched sound erupted from one of the walls, making Dingo whip around in surprise. One of the windows on the left wall shattered, sending glass shards flying into the room. Before he could blink, animals lunged into the room from outside, snarling and leaping at the guards. Another deafening crack sounded, making him whirl around just in time to see the window on the right wall break and send glass spilling to the ground. Army members poured in through the broken window, diving toward the nearest enemy. Behind Dingo, the high-pitched sound of shattering glass rose in the air, making a wry grin cross his face. Howls bellowed out behind him as army members surged into the house.

Whipping around, he turned back to face the living room, searching for Makero. A heated swirl of fighting swam past his eyes. One of the forest animals soared through the air with a yelp and smacked into a couch, ripping the fabric and making it rock on its feet. Teetering to the side, the torn couch tumbled over backward and hit the ground on its back with a thud, revealing a rotted trap door beneath it. Past the fallen couch, Dingo could make out the bristling orange fur of Makero. With a dangerous growl, the King lashed out at a pack member and sent him tumbling helplessly back with one powerful swipe of his paw. Yelping in alarm, the guard flew backward and slammed into the wide television at the back of the room. The screen shattered. Before the pack member could move, the TV toppled over and slammed him against the ground with a thunderous crack, snapping the wires behind it. A spark flashed in the darkness, making everyone's fur stand up.

Tearing his eyes off the television, Dingo whipped around and raced toward the King, weaving past crowds of fighting animals. "Makero!"

The King whipped around in alarm, then sighed in relief. "Dingo! It's you..."

Dingo narrowed his eyes intently. "Are all the prisoners free?"

Seriousness darkened Makero's eyes. "Yes, I untied them all when the fight broke out. Everyone's free." His green irises glowed knowingly. "Saderia started this fight, didn't she?"

"I think so." Dingo took a shaky breath, then whipped around to gaze out at the fight, his bloody sides heaving with heavy pants. "She must

still be outside. She's sending army members into the house." Taking a deep breath, he let his gaze land on a crowd of outcasts racing through the room. "You five!" he shouted, raising his voice to be heard over the shrieks of battle. "Get outside and fight! Find Saderia! Tell her all of the prisoners are free!"

The dingoes nodded quickly, then whipped around and raced toward one of the shattered windows, dodging the guards' attacks. Narrowing his eyes in a determined glare, Dingo whipped back around to face Makero. "Where's Jeb and the rest of your family?"

Makero's eyes shone in the darkness. "I sent them outside. I untied them in one of the rooms, then broke the window and told them to escape. Cia, Jash, and Jeb are all hiding out in the woods. I've asked them to help any other escapees get away from the fight."

"Good." Dingo took a deep breath, then turned away from Makero and stared out at the legions of fighters crowding around him. A dark blaze of fury and passion glowed in his light brown eyes. "Everyone, get outside! Drive the guards back!"

"Princess Saderia!" Alarm gleamed in Saderia's eyes and she instantly whipped around at the sound of her name, unsheathing her claws in preparation for a fight. Surprise shone on her face when she realized it wasn't guards. Five outcasts raced toward her, rounding around the left corner of the house. The bloody canines skidded to a halt in front of her, their eyes wide with alarm but glowing with the intensity of the fight.

"We're prisoners!" one of the dingoes choked out, his voice shaky with pants. "Dingo sent us out here to find you. All of the prisoners are free—Dingo and the forest King untied all of them! But there's still a lot of fighting going on in there!"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in fiery determination. "Thank you. Join the fight. We'll drive the pack members out." When the outcasts dipped their heads and dove into the thick battle, Saderia whirled around and faced the wild fray around her with gleaming amber eyes. "Fall back! Move towards the back of the clearing!"

The instant the words left her mouth, her troops tore away from the brutal fight and backed away from the house, never taking their eyes off the enemy. Triumph gleamed in the eyes of the guards. Thinking their enemies

were fleeing, the guards chased after her army, leaving a wide, empty space between the battle raging outside and the house.

A cunning gleam lit up Saderia's eyes. "Now circle around the guards! Put yourselves between them and the prison! Drive them out instead of in!"

Surprise and alarm shone in the guards' eyes. Triumphant howls boomed out from her army. Before the pack members could react, the army members dove away from their fights and raced around either side of the stunned crowd of pack members. The instant the troops stood in the empty space between the guards and the house, they dove at the pack members, catching them by surprise and tackling them before they could turn around.

Grinning in triumph, Saderia dove into the fray and lunged at the nearest guard, landing heavily on his back. A yelp escaped the dingo's throat and he instantly reared back. Before she could dig her claws in, she flew off of him. Pain surged through her body when she smacked the earth. The second she hit the ground, the guard lunged at her, letting out a furious snarl. With a growl, he slammed his paws down on hers, pinning her to the ground. His claws drove deep into her paws, tearing a loud hiss of pain out of her chest.

The pack member bared his fangs over her face and sneered, but before he could lunge for her throat, she kicked up with her back paws, raking her claws across his belly and sending him tumbling away with a yelp. Gritting her teeth, Saderia rolled over and leapt to her paws, then whipped around to face the enemy. A paw lashed out at her and claws raked across her face before she could even turn, making her wince and stagger back with a strangled cry. Blood trickled down her face and dripped into her eyes, blurring her vision. Blinking furiously, she shook the blood away, then looked up sharply and felt her heart skip a beat when she saw the pack member bunch his muscles and lunge toward her.

Saderia's mind whirled. Her paws moved before she even realized what she was doing. Letting out a shaky gasp, she ducked down and lowered her head to avoid being hit. Wind rustled her fur as the dingo soared over her and a loud howl echoed in her ears. Narrowing her eyes, Saderia instantly leapt to her paws and whipped around. Behind her, the dingo landed clumsily on the blood-stained grass and struggled to turn around. Without hesitating, Saderia let out a snarl and lunged at him. Her

paws smacked against his shoulders and she slammed down onto his back before he could turn, making him let out a loud yelp. Before he could throw her off, she drove her claws into his shoulders and pushed him down. The dingo smacked the earth with a pained howl and a sharp crack.

Instantly, the guard tried to roll around to throw her off, but she moved quicker. Tearing her claws out of his skin, she dove to the side and rolled, then leapt to her paws before the dingo even had a chance to get up. The second he staggered to his paws, she whipped her claws across his face and sent him stumbling back with a yelp. Gritting her teeth, she darted after him and swiped her claws across his chest. Wincing, he staggered back. His eyes darted to her face when she made a move to chase him. Fear shone in his eyes. Before she could move, he whipped around and fled, his tail flying out behind him.

Saderia froze and stared after him in surprise, then let a triumphant smile creep across her face. Whirling around, she gazed out at the thick, bloody fight around her and started to speak, then broke off and felt her eyes widen in surprise when a loud, familiar voice shouted her name. “Saderia!”

Blinking in surprise, she whipped around to see who had spoken and felt a wave of shock rise in her chest. Her mouth gaped open in disbelief. “Dad?”

Makero leapt past a thick crowd of fighting canines and skidded to a halt in front of her, his green eyes shining with relief and his face glowing with a bright smile.

Saderia’s eyes widened and an overwhelming sense of relief rose in her chest. “Dad!” Letting out a cry, she dove toward him and buried her face in his blood-streaked chest. The screams and howls echoing around her seemed to fade into the background. Tears of relief glimmered on the edges of her eyes. “You’re okay...”

Makero rested his paw gently on her shoulder and gave her a warm smile. “I’m glad you’re safe, Saderia.” His green eyes grew misty and clouded. “I’m so proud of you...”

Saderia’s eyes suddenly flew open and her heart skipped with anxiety. Instantly, she looked up and met his gaze with narrowed amber eyes. “Is everyone...”

“Everyone’s safe.” Makero offered her a faint smile. “All the prisoners are fine. Cia and Jash are all right, too, and so are Jeb and his family.”

Fear gleamed in Saderia’s eyes. “What about Dingo?”

“What about me?”

A gasp escaped Saderia’s throat at the sound of the familiar voice and she whipped around to stare at the front of her house. Her heart skipped and her eyes widened in amazement. Dingo stood in the doorway of the house, a bright smile on his face and a proud gleam in his light brown eyes. Prisoners streamed out of the den on either side of him, their eyes bright with gratitude. Relief glowed in Saderia’s eyes. Blinking back tears, she raced toward Dingo and pressed her face against his bloody chest, a weak smile spreading across her face. Her friend gave her a faint smile and patted her on the back with a bloody paw.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia reluctantly pulled herself away from him to face him, her eyes shining with relief. A dark sense of worry rose in her chest when she took in Dingo’s rough appearance. An uncountable number of grisly scars sliced through his filthy brown fur. Dried blood made his shaggy fur stick up in clumps, while fresh blood dribbled from his mouth and streaked his fur. He looked just seconds away from death.

Pain and worry flashed in her eyes. “Are you...okay?”

Dingo snickered, revealing bloody fangs. “Are you kidding me? I’ve never been better!” A brilliant glow shone in his light brown eyes and he flicked her lightly with his tail. “Don’t worry about me. We’ve got a war to win! Did Dash send you a message?”

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes at his light-heartedness, Saderia nodded quickly. “Yes. After this fight, we’re supposed to go to the desert and wait a few feet away from Rock’s camp. At a certain signal, we’ll attack.”

“Got it.” Giving her a wry smile, Dingo whipped around and lunged into the thick fray outside the house, shouting orders to his outcasts and letting out a deafening howl.

Gritting her teeth, Saderia dove after him into the thick of the battle. Heat washed over her and snarls rang in her ears, but her heart beat more strongly than ever. The roar of her father rose in the air as he raced into the fight. Gazing around with glowing eyes, she felt her heart leap with

triumph. Legions of guards fled to the woods all around the clearing, letting out terrified howls. A few remained, but her army drastically outnumbered them. One by one, the guards tore themselves away from the fight and ran for their lives, shrieking in terror.

Fire blazed in Saderia's eyes. "We've won! Drive the last of them out and get moving! Head to the edge of the forest! The battle is won, and now we will win the war!"

Screams of determination rang in her ears, echoing in the tense, cold air. Her heart shone with pride and a powerful feeling of strength surged through her bloody body. So caught up in the battle, she didn't notice the lone figure standing in the shadows of the dirt path, his dusty dark brown fur bristling and his dark brown eyes wide with horror. When the figure whipped around and darted away as fast as he could, she hardly noticed the shadowy movement.

Throwing back her head, she let out a loud, echoing roar. "To the desert!"

"You four, form a hunting party and go out hunting to the left of the camp." On the very edge of the jagged ledge jutting out of Rock's den, Dash glared down at the crowd of burly canines gathered below him and raised his tail to signal which direction he meant. An eerie gleam lit up his amber eyes. "Return only when you've caught enough prey for all. You three, go hunting in the opposite direction," he added, gesturing to another crowd of muscular pack members.

Reluctantly, Rock's followers peeled away from the large crowd and banded together to form hunting parties. Without a word, the dingoes darted out into the desert and disappeared in the sea of shadowy sand dunes. A triumphant sneer twitched at the corners of Dash's mouth, but he hid it as he glanced back at the crowd of pack members below him. Silvery moonlight lit up his dark brown mane and shone in his cool, calculating amber eyes. Peering through the shadows haunting the camp, Dash studied the remaining pack members with a thoughtful gaze. A good chunk of pack dogs were missing from the crowd, sent off on 'hunting parties.' Already, he had managed to dwindle down Rock's forces. Part of him wanted to get rid of a few more, but sending anymore away would seem suspicious. This was enough.

A soft chuckle sounded behind him, making his ears prick up. Dastarius stalked to his side and gazed down at the crowds of canines, a knowing sneer on his face. "Ah...I'm starting to see your plan. You sent Rock away so that you could act as the pack's sole Leader and send some of his fighters off on hunting parties without having to worry about Rock being here to question you." His amber eyes glittered in the shadows of the night. "Princess and her army will show up soon, won't they? That's why you sent away all those dingoes—so that there would be less pack members for her troops to fight."

Dash nodded and let a sneer creep across his face. "That's part of the plan."

"But what about Rock?" Dastarius raised an eyebrow and faced him curiously. "Isn't killing him your main goal? How are you going to do that if he's not here?"

"Don't worry." Dash's eyes shone knowingly. "With any luck, he'll show up soon."

Dastarius studied him thoughtfully, then let a grin creep across his face. "Nice planning, son. I think this plot of yours will work to perfection." He paused, an eerie shadow flitting across his face. His voice dropped to a cool murmur. "There's one thing I need you to do, though."

Dash frowned and glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "What's that?"

Dastarius coolly met his gaze, his amber eyes eerily grave. "When the fight begins, it will be wild and confusing. No one will know what anyone else is doing and it will be hard to see who's doing what with all the fighting. Your main goal should always be to kill Rock, but when the time comes, I want you to find Saderia. I'll tell you what to do from there."

Dash frowned in confusion. "Find Saderia? Why?"

An eerie smile crept across Dastarius's face. "You'll see."

"Stop!" Saderia skidded to a halt at the top of a shadowy sand dune and held up her tail to signal for her army to halt, her eyes shining in the faint light of the moon. Behind her, the thick wall of troops thundering after her skidded to an abrupt halt and crept up behind her to peer over the dune. At the head of the army, Dingo and Makero skidded to a stop beside her, gazing out at the dark desert with narrowed eyes. Slowly, the sound of paw

steps died away behind them. A tense silence fell over the desert. Every animal seemed to hold their breath. A brilliant light of determination glowed in their eyes.

Rock's camp rose up out of the dark sand just a few feet away. Silver moonlight glinted off the top of his monstrous den and shone down on the long, rocky ledge jutting out over the camp. Hundreds of dingoes wandered around the shadowy camp, growling softly to each other. Their soft voices floated dimly over to Saderia's ears. On the edge of the jagged ledge jutting out from Rock's den stood a shadowy figure—either Rock or Dash. In one smooth movement, the dark animal lunged off the side of the ledge and leapt toward the jutting spikes sticking out below the platform until he reached the ground.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and felt her heart burn with anticipation. Soon, they would siege the camp and destroy Rock's plans once and for all. All they had to do was wait for the signal. A cool fire danced in her eyes. Whirling around, she faced the enormous army behind her and dropped her voice to a soft hiss. "Half of you, skirt around the camp to attack from a different angle—take them by surprise. If you don't get all the way around the camp before it's time to strike, that's okay. I just want you to attack from a different position. I'll stay here, and I will lead my army into battle first. Only after I attack should you rush in to attack. Our main goal is to kill Rock. Remember that."

Dingo narrowed his eyes and sharply flicked his tail. "I'll lead them."

Saderia dipped her head. "Good. Thank you."

Without a word, Dingo nodded, then turned and flicked his tail, signaling for the back half of the army to follow him. Slowly, the scarred outcasts and forest animals in the back rows crept toward him. Flicking his tail in farewell, Dingo bounded silently down the side of the sand dune and raced across the shadowy land. The back half of the army fell into step behind him and raced after him as he led them through the tall dunes, their paws silent against the sand. Soon, the entire army vanished behind a wall of rising sand dunes.

Tearing her eyes off the place where they had vanished, Saderia gazed at the quiet camp. A dangerous gleam shone in her eyes. "On my signal, we attack. Until then, we wait."

The fighters behind her narrowed their eyes and stood rigidly still, not saying a word. Each focused intently on the camp and their eyes gleamed with anticipation. Silence fell over the desert and a deep tension hung over the troops' shoulders. The entire army seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for the signal to attack. Saderia dug her claws deep into the sand and gritted her teeth. Within an hour, Rock would run into camp...The second he appeared, she would attack...That was what Dash had told her in his message. Now all she could do was wait and hope his plan would work out...

A shadowy figure suddenly appeared at the top of a sand dune several feet away, facing the camp. Saderia's eyes flicked to the figure just as it raced down the side of the dune. A flash of shock flickered into her eyes and her heart sped up with anticipation. Was that Rock? Behind her, anxious murmurs rose up from her army. Every animal behind her seemed to lean forward, their eyes locked on the racing figure.

Saderia gritted her teeth. "Wait for my signal..." Her claws dug deep into the sand and her eyes narrowed in determination. Her heart hammered wildly and all her fur stood on end, bristling in anticipation. Just a little closer...The shadowy canine figure charged toward camp as fast as he could, nearly stumbling over his paws. A flash of moonlight flickered down on him as he charged across the sand, shining light on long, dusty dark brown fur. Saderia's eyes flashed in the dim light. *Rock*. Dash had been right.

All of the army members inched forward, their fur bristling and their tails lashing with anticipation. Saderia bunched her muscles and flexed her claws. "Wait for it..."

Rock bounded frantically toward the camp, his dark, shaggy tail streaming out wildly behind him. The second he set foot in the very back of his camp, moonlight caught on his face and illuminated the gleam of fear in his dark brown eyes. Saderia's eyes widened and she instantly bared her fangs. A furious roar tore out of her chest. "**Attack!**"

Howls erupted around her, splitting the tense air. Baring her fangs, Saderia lunged down the side of the dune and raced toward the camp, a dangerous snarl tearing out of her throat. Her army streamed after her, screaming at the top of their lungs. Their paws thundered against the ground like an unending clap of thunder. Pack members all around camp whipped

around in shock. In the center of camp, Rock skidded to an abrupt halt and whipped around to stare at the approaching army, his dark brown eyes wide with horror.

A loud, terrified howl tore out of his throat. "We're under attack!"

At the same time, Saderia's army leapt into camp and crashed into the howling pack members with a thunderous smack. Screams erupted like an explosion, burning Saderia's ears. Gritting her teeth, she sailed past hordes of lunging pack members and landed on the sand in the center of camp. Overwhelming heat swept over her, already carrying the faint tang of blood. Dingoes and forest animals collided all around her, crashing to the ground with vicious shrieks and lashing out with brutal swipes. Animals tumbled past her, locked in deadly battles and swiping at each other with furious snarls.

Howls suddenly boomed out from the other side of camp along with a thunderous stampede of paw steps. Shock gleamed in the eyes of the fighting pack members. Some of them struggled to turn around, only to be cut down by Saderia's troops. Howling at the top of their lungs, Dingo's army plunged into the camp. Hundreds of animals lunged at the pack members, their determined snarls ringing in the air. Deadly crashes echoed around camp as animals collapsed to the ground. Screams of fury and determination ruled the night. Eerie shadows danced across the battlefield, cloaking the fighters in darkness.

Fire shone in Saderia's eyes. "Find Rock! Kill Rock!" Letting out a furious snarl, she lunged into the fray and took off running. Through the thick crowds of fighting all around her, she caught a glimpse of Dingo racing through the battle, howling orders at the top of his lungs. Gritting her teeth, Saderia swung around and raced after him, ducking under a pair of fighting canines. All she had to do was find Rock. Somewhere in this battle, he was running from her. If she found him, the war was over and victory was hers.

Weaving through crowds of battling animals and ducking under the vicious swipes of the pack members, Saderia raced in the direction Dingo had run and scanned the fight for any sign of the pack's Leader. Her eyes flicked past hordes of battling canines and forest animals, then landed squarely on one animal. Her paws froze in place.

Rock stood in the center of the vicious battle, his long fur bristling and his face twisted with horror. His eyes flicked to her face and locked on her blazing amber eyes. Fear and confusion flashed in his dark brown irises. Staggering backward, he whipped around and raced away as fast as he could, ducking past crowds of fighters and flattening his ears. Fury blazed in Saderia's chest. Letting out a furious shriek, she lunged after him, weaving through crowds and pushing her legs to move faster than they ever had before.

A dangerous snarl rose in her throat. She wouldn't let him get away this time. This was the end, and Rock knew it. Ahead of her, the Leader looked back with a gasp of terror and ran faster, weaving frantically between battles. Ducking under fighting animals and panting wildly, Rock raced desperately toward his den, his tail flying out behind him. Fury blazed in Saderia's eyes and she made herself move faster, determined not to lose sight of him. A thunderous snarl tore out of her throat as she lunged over a pack member in her way. Hitting the ground hard, she never stopped running. Sand flew up behind her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught flashes of a shaggy brown figure racing through the crowds, ducking under vicious blows. *Dingo*. His loud commands echoed in the air, but the scarred canine never once stopped to fight and only ducked under the attacks of the pack members. His eyes were focused intently on only one target and his paws moved wildly across the ground. Dingo must have spotted Rock, too.

Whipping around, Saderia chased after Rock and forced herself to move faster. A raw, dangerous snarl tore out of her throat and rang in the air. "You won't get away this time! Not after what you did to my Mom!"

Screams echoed around the camp, ringing in Dash's ears and raising all the fur along his back. Thick crowds of fighting animals swirled past him on either side as he raced through the sweltering battle, his breath coming out in short pants. His eyes flicked wildly back and forth, scanning the blood-streaked land around him for any sign of Rock or Saderia. A fiery light danced in his amber eyes and his heart pounded wildly in his chest. Triumph burned in his mind. Everything had worked exactly as he had planned...Now all he had to do was kill Rock and end this nightmare once and for all.

Gritting his teeth, he dove into the fray, weaving past hordes of screaming animals and scanning the crowd for any sign of his friends or the dingo tyrant. His father's request burned in his mind, but he pushed it away. Trying to look for Saderia in this bloody mess would be impossible. When he found her, it would be by chance. Besides, his goal was to find Rock. Wherever he found Rock, he was sure to find Saderia and Dingo, as well.

An ear-piercing shriek split the air, rising above the howls and cries echoing around the camp and making Dash freeze in place. Whipping around, he let out a gasp and felt rage rise in his chest. Just inches away from him, a huge pack member slammed a blood-soaked lioness down against the sand and bared his fangs over her throat. Without thinking, he bared his fangs and leapt toward the pack member with a vicious snarl. His paws landed squarely on the dingo's back and his claws drove deep into his shoulders.

A yelp of alarm escaped the dingo's mouth. Jerking away from the forest animal, he reared back, sending Dash flying off his back. Smoothly, Dash twisted in midair and landed neatly a few paces away, his fur bristling with fury. The dingo tore away from the lioness and whipped around to face his attacker, while the wounded lioness staggered to her paws and raced away. Shock gleamed in the pack member's eyes when he saw Dash glaring back at him. His mouth gaped open and a furious cry escaped his throat. *"Traitor!"*

All around him, pack members whipped around in shock and let out furious snarls when they saw Dash. An enraged chant swept through the crowd of Rock's followers before Dash could even realize what had happened.

"Traitor! Traitor!"

Alarm flashed in Dash's eyes. The pack member he had tackled lunged at him, forcing him to leap quickly to the side. The second he dodged one pack member, another leapt at him, letting out a furious snarl. Other pack members raced toward him when he tried to leap away, snarling with anger. Gritting his teeth, Dash ducked under their vicious attacks and tried not to wince when one of their strikes tore a deep gash across his face. Bunching his muscles, he leapt over one of the pack dogs and hit the ground hard. Not stopping to look back, he raced into the fray as fast as he could, ducking under blows from pack members all around him. Vicious howls

followed him, but he ignored the furious chants and kept running, ducking under fights and weaving deeper into the battle.

A sudden flash of dark brown fur caught his eye, making him whip around in surprise. Through a crowd of fighting animals, he could just make out a burly, long-haired dingo racing across the sand, heading frantically toward the monstrous den at the back of the camp. Fury blazed in Dash's eyes. *Rock*. Howls burst out behind him as he launched himself into the air and slammed down onto the ground, taking off running as fast as he could. The dark den towered above him, pitch black in the darkness of the night. Ignoring the howls behind him, Dash raced after Rock as fast as his legs could carry him.

His eyes blazed with fury and he let out a snarl. "I'll make you pay, Rock!"

"Keep fighting! For your forest! For your desert! For your freedom!" Saderia's furious voice rang out over the howls of battle. Heavy pants heaved out of her chest and her muscles ached, but she never slowed down or stopped running. Determination blazed in her eyes and her heart pounded wildly. Blood trickled past her eyes and her wounds burned in pain, but she ignored it. Nothing could stop her from chasing Rock.

A wild, determined chant rose up among her army, ringing out over the howls of the pack members. "For freedom!" Animals swiped at each other all around her, tumbling past her and slamming into her sides. Pack members lashed out at her, but she ignored the pain and ducked under their blows. Dingoes and forest animals crashed to the ground around her, but she lunged over them and kept moving. The salty scent of blood rose in the air and the earth-shattering roar of the battle was deafening, but Saderia paid no attention to it. Nothing could distract her. Vengeance was the only thing on her mind.

A pitch black shadow suddenly swept over her, sending a chill racing through her. All of her fur bristled in alarm and she skidded to an abrupt halt right at the bottom of Rock's monstrous den. Shock glimmered in her eyes, but her heart only grew harder with a fiery sense of rage when she gazed up at the den. Jagged spikes reached out toward her, wreathed in shadows. Moonlight glinted off their sharp points, raising all the fur on her back and making her claws dig deep into the sand. Several yards of pure,

hard rock towered above her, leading up to the enormous ledge jutting out over the desert. On that ledge, Rock would be hiding.

Fiery determination boiled in her chest, steeling her heart and wiping away her fear. Gritting her teeth, she bunched her muscles and leapt toward the nearest spike. Her paws slammed into the cold stone and the jagged edges sliced her paw pads. Not daring to slow down, she vaulted off the spike and lunged toward the next one, then the next. Lunging from spike to spike and feeling wind whip past her fur, Saderia scaled the huge rock. Her eyes blazed when her paws smacked the topmost spike. Gritting her teeth, she lunged upward and leapt onto the top ledge of Rock's monstrous den.

Moonlight shimmered down on the long, rough ledge, turning her bristling orange fur to silver and her blazing amber eyes to an icy white. Scraping her claws across the hard stone of the ledge, Saderia whipped around and gazed out at the very edge of the enormous platform. A fire blazed in her chest when she saw who was waiting for her.

Rock stood frozen on the edge of the platform, his dusty dark brown fur bristling and his dark brown eyes wide with alarm. Terror flashed in his eyes at the sight of her and he instantly stumbled back a pace, his claws scraping the rock.

A low growl tore out of Saderia's chest and her eyes blazed with hatred. Squaring her shoulders, she crouched down and slunk toward him, a feral snarl rumbling in her throat. Her claws clicked against the stone and her tail lashed sharply back and forth. Fury burned in her eyes. "It's over, Rock. You're going to pay for what you've done."

Rock's eyes widened in alarm and he took a step back. His face pale, he blinked several times, then shook himself. Gritting his teeth, he narrowed his eyes and bared his fangs in a dangerous snarl. "You want a fight, forest food? Well, you can have one!"

Letting out an enraged snarl, Rock lunged toward her, his claws outstretched. With a furious growl, Saderia launched herself at him, her claws glinting in the moonlight. Their bodies slammed together in midair, knocking the breath out of Saderia's throat. Rock's claws raked her flesh just as she started to fall, sending her flying away with blood pouring out of her side. With an agonizing smack, Saderia slammed down on the craggy ledge, her breath leaving her. Her head cracked against the stone and her

vision blurred with dizziness. Her own hot blood splattered her fur, making her wince. Pain burned in her side where several deep claw marks scored her flesh. Behind her, Rock crashed to the ground with a sharp thud and gritted his teeth, pushing himself painfully to his paws.

Desperately, Saderia blinked the dizziness away and scrambled frantically to her feet, knowing she couldn't afford to pause. A loud yelp of alarm tore out of her chest when a heavy weight crashed down on her back. Claws dug into her shoulders and pain shot through her body. Letting out a cry, she desperately reared back, throwing Rock off. The Leader soared away from her. Twisting in midair, he landed neatly on his paws just a few feet away, facing her with flashing dark brown eyes. A cold growl rumbled in his throat and a sneer crossed his face. Alarm burned in Saderia's chest. Frantically, she whipped around to face him, then let out a cry of shock when Rock's paw whipped out at her face. Thick claws raked her muzzle before she could duck, sending her staggering back in pain. Blood dripped down her face and pain blurred her vision. Another sharp blow struck her chest before she could recover, tearing a loud cry of pain from her mouth.

Hot red liquid splashed across her white chest and splattered the rocky ledge. Biting back a cry, Saderia faced Rock with wide eyes. Instantly, she ducked to avoid another blow and felt his paw soar right over her head, rustling her fur. Gritting her teeth, she jerked away from another quick swipe, then lashed out as hard as she could, aiming for Rock's sneering face. Quickly, Rock caught her paw with his own and dug his claws deep into her flesh. Saderia's eyes widened in shock and a shrill cry of pain tore out of her throat. Before she could fight back, he yanked her paw viciously out to the side, snapping her leg and sending her tumbling to the right. Agony shot through her leg and her vision blurred with pain. Desperately, she tried to yank her blood-soaked paw out of Rock's grasp, but the dingo tyrant sunk his claws in deeper. Before she could try to escape, he jerked her paw sharply to the other side, lifting her off the ground and sending her flying away from him.

A scream tore out of her throat. Burning pain shot to every part of her body when her back smacked the hard, jagged platform and her head snapped back against the rock. Her breath left her throat. Sharp, jagged stones drove into her skin, making her fur feel wet and sticky with blood. The world tilted around her as pain and blood blurred her vision. Through

the haze of agony, she saw a dark brown figure loom over her and raise a paw. Alarm shot through her. Letting out a gasp, she rolled away as fast as she could just as Rock slammed a paw down on the stone where she had laid just seconds before.

Heavy pants shuddered out of her chest and her bloody fur bristled in fear. Using all of her strength, she scrambled to her paws and leapt away seconds before Rock swiped at the place where she had been. Air rushed past her fur as she soared away from him. Her paws landed clumsily on the stone several paces away and her sore leg quivered, making her nearly stumble to the ground. Gasping for breath, she caught herself and whipped around to face Rock, her fur bristling in fury. The Leader whirled around to meet her glare and narrowed his eyes. Baring his fangs, he lunged toward her with a loud, echoing howl.

Fear shot through Saderia. Letting out a gasp, she slammed her paws against the rock and launched herself into the air in a desperate attempt to dodge. Pain shot through her when she hit the ground several paces away. Whirling around, she saw Rock race toward her, a deadly glint in his eyes. Alarm shone in her eyes and she gritted her teeth. Lashing her tail, she raced away from him just as he lunged toward her. If she could just get far enough away and take him by surprise, she could turn the fight in her favor...Panting heavily, she darted across the platform and skidded to a halt near the edge of the ledge, her heart pounding. Gasping for breath, she whipped around and narrowed her eyes.

Behind her, Rock skidded to a halt on the middle of the platform a few paces away. Bloodlust shone in his eyes. A cruel sneer curled up the corners of his mouth and he let out a chuckle. "Come here, Princess! Come here so I can break your legs—just like your mother!"

Boiling hot fury surged through Saderia, setting her blood on fire. Baring her fangs, she let out a vicious snarl and launched herself at Rock, forgetting her pain and the blood soaking her fur. Instantly, Rock dodged away and lashed out at her when she landed just inches away from him. Moving as fast as she could, she ducked, then lunged closer to him and raked her claws across his face. A yelp escaped the Leader's throat and he staggered back, his face dripping with blood. Without stopping, Saderia dove after him and raised a paw to strike again. Rock's eyes flashed through the blood pouring down his face and a dangerous glint lit up his dark irises.

Before she could claw him, he smacked her paw away with one quick swipe. With a growl, he lunged at her and tore his claws across her face. Pain surged through her and a cry tore out of her throat. Blinded by blood and pain, she staggered back, her paws tumbling clumsily over the sticky ridges in the platform. A jolt of terror shot through her when her back paw stumbled over a ridge into open air.

Her eyes widened and a shriek escaped her chest. Desperately, she caught herself and pulled her leg back onto the stone. Whipping around, she felt her breath catch and her heart stop. Her paws teetered on the side of the long platform and a horrifying drop-off stretched out just inches to the left. Dizziness swept over her, making her wobble on the ragged edge. Jagged spikes reached out toward her from below, threatening her with sharp, glinting ends. Beyond the spikes, shadowy figures tumbled across the sand. From such a great distance, the fighters looked tiny. Their screams boomed in the air, but sounded far away. Even from such a huge distance, though, she could smell the overpowering tang of blood.

Her heart stopped. Swallowing back fear, she tore her gaze off the spiraling drop and whipped around to face Rock. Her eyes widened and a jolt of alarm shot through her when she saw the dusty dark brown dingo leap toward her, a vicious snarl echoing in the air. Letting out a gasp, she instantly leapt away from the edge. Her paws smacked the stone in the center of the platform. Wildly, she whipped around just in time to see Rock land inches away from the edge and whip around to face her. Before she could react, he leapt at her again. Without warning, the dingo Leader soared right over her head and landed behind her. Her eyes widening in alarm, Saderia whipped around and instantly backed up a pace, her eyes shining with fear.

Rock crept toward her, letting out a cruel snicker. Malice and cruel amusement glimmered in his dark brown eyes. "Looks like you've got a lot of fight in you, Princess. Your mother was the same way. I destroyed her, though. Now I'll destroy you."

Saderia narrowed her eyes and gritted her teeth, her legs shaking with pain and her fur bristling with anger. A dark shadow flitted across her face.

Rock let out a dark chuckle and stalked toward her, licking his lips and smirking. "Breaking her was a lot of fun, actually. She put up quite the

fight before she gave up. Did you know she thinks you're dead, Princess? All I had to do was say your name and she would cry. Sometimes I think she wanted me to kill her to put her out of her misery."

A dangerous growl rumbled in Saderia's throat and her claws dug into the rock. Anger blazed in her chest and her eyes narrowed in a furious glare.

Rock stalked closer until she could smell his hot, blood-scented breath. A cruel snicker rumbled in his chest. "I never killed her, though. Where's the fun in that? She screamed when I broke her legs in front of the pack. I wonder if you'll do the same."

Fiery rage surged through Saderia, turning her blood to lava. Blinding hot fury blazed in her amber eyes and a thunderous snarl tore out of her chest. "*You monster!*"

Forgetting her pain, she lunged at him and tore her claws across his face as hard as she could. A stunned yelp escaped Rock's throat and he staggered back, his face streaming with blood. Saderia never slowed down. Moving with a speed she didn't know she had, she chased him and lashed out again, ripping open a deep gash in his chest. When Rock howled in pain and stumbled back, she ripped her claws across his shoulder, then lashed out again and caught his leg. Blood seeped through her claws and Rock's strangled howls rang in her ears, but she never slowed down. A fire burned in every part of her body, driving her on. A memory of her mother fueled the fire, making her entire body shake with rage. Her vicious snarl echoed in the air. "You'll pay for what you did to her!"

Moving so quickly her mind could barely keep up, she ducked under a clumsy attack, then slammed her paw into his leg, sweeping it out from underneath him. With a cry of alarm, Rock stumbled forward, but Saderia lunged toward him just as he started to fall. Summoning every bit of her strength, she reared up on her back paws and slammed both her front paws onto his shoulders. Letting out a howl of pain, Rock flew backward, his back paws twisting against the rock. Before he could realize what had happened, he slammed against the hard ledge and winced, his back snapping from the impact. Saderia didn't waste a second. Baring her fangs in a deadly snarl, she lunged at him and landed right on top of him, slamming her paws against his to pin him down. His shadowed eyes met hers.

Shaking with rage, Saderia drove her claws into his paws and pinned him against the stone. Blood streaked down her face and past her blazing amber eyes. A feral snarl rumbled in her throat. Glaring down into Rock's cold, dark brown eyes, Saderia bared her fangs and let out a dangerous growl. Just one more move...and Rock would be dead.

Rock gazed up at her blazing amber eyes with dark, dangerous brown irises. An icy sneer spread across his face and he let out a cold, eerie chuckle. "You think you've won, Princess?" A wild, bloodthirsty gleam flashed in his dark brown eyes. "Think again."

Before she could react, he tore his paw out from under hers and raked his claws across her throat. A gasp escaped her mouth and she reared back, her body burning with pain. Blood splashed down her white chest and pain seared her throat. A triumphant grin spread across Rock's face. Without warning, his back paws slammed into her stomach, knocking the breath out of her and sending her flying up into the air. A cry tore out of her throat and her body twisted in midair, stinging from the impact. Shock washed over her like a bucket of ice water and her eyes grew wide. Air rushed past her, rustling her bloody fur. A wild, terrified scream tore out of her chest as she sailed over the rocky platform.

Her back slammed against the jagged edge of the platform and her head snapped back over open air. Before she could stop herself, she tumbled backward off the ledge. A scream ripped out of her throat as she plummeted downward. Desperately, she twisted and reached out wildly as air rushed past her. Something hard and jagged smacked into her paws and her claws splintered. Her scream abruptly cut off and her breath left her as her entire body snapped in midair and abruptly stopped falling, nearly jerking her paws off the ledge. Desperately, Saderia drove her broken claws into the jagged rock and looked up, her eyes wide with horror. Her paws clung desperately to the rough edge at the end of the platform. The rest of her body dangled helplessly over open air. Her breath caught.

Below her, the battle raged on. Tiny, shadowed figures covered the entire camp, tumbling across the sandy ground and seeming a million miles away. Blood rose in the air and their screams echoed in her ears, making her entire body shudder. The sand was stained with blood so that it looked more red than light brown. Thick fighting covered the land below her, making it almost impossible to see the sand, whether red or brown. Dingoes and

forest animals lashed out at their enemies and spattered their fur with blood. The scene seemed to flicker before her eyes. A vision of the bloody ocean flashed through her mind. Horror gleamed in Saderia's eyes and her breath caught in her throat.

Her Dream was coming true.

Chapter Thirty-Five

For Freedom

“Saderia!” Dash skidded to a halt in the black shadow of Rock’s towering den, his amber eyes wide with horror. Far above him, Saderia dangled from the very edge of the long, craggy platform, her paws clinging desperately to the ledge. Her paw slipped when she tried to pull herself up, making Dash’s heart stop. Just barely catching herself, she clung desperately to the jagged rock. Her body swayed dangerously over open air, sending fear washing over him. Terror glowed in Dash’s eyes. Somehow, he had to save her...

Gritting his teeth in determination, he let out a snarl and lunged at the glinting spikes of Rock’s den. His paws slammed the jagged stone. Without pausing, he bounded to the next spike, then launched himself at the next, moving as fast as he possibly could. His heart raced wildly and his paws felt clammy with horror. Never stopping, he bounded from spike to spike and felt his heart leap when he reached the top outcropping. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rock stalk across the blood-spattered ledge toward the edge where Saderia was dangling. A cold, dangerous glint shone in his dark brown eyes.

Panic surged through Dash’s body. Desperately, he lunged off the final spike and stumbled clumsily onto the huge platform. Gasping for breath and struggling to stand, he whipped his head around to face Rock and let out a wild, desperate shout. “Rock, stop!”

Rock froze and whipped around, his eyes widening in surprise. Shock gleamed in his eyes and his mouth gaped open in disbelief at the sight of the bristling lion. Blinking several times, he stared at him in shock, then narrowed his eyes. An eerie shadow crossed his face and a cruel sneer curled up his mouth. “You...” He let out a cruel snicker. “You’re just in time for the show, Dash.” Smirking, he stepped aside, giving Dash a straight path to Saderia. “I have the Princess cornered. All I have to do now is push her and she’s dead.” The Leader nodded to the ledge and sneered. “Why don’t you do the honors?”

Dash's heart leapt with hope. Maybe Rock didn't know he was a traitor! Maybe he thought he was still on his side. Without a word, Dash bounded across the bloody platform and dove past Rock. With a gasp, he raced toward the edge of the ledge, then froze when a growl sounded behind him. "I sure hope you make a good choice, Dash..."

Dash's eyes widened and his heart sank. Freezing in place, he slowly looked over his shoulder. His breath caught and his hopes shattered in a single instant. Behind him, Rock stalked into the middle of the platform, blocking his only escape from the ledge. A cold shadow darkened his face and a dangerous gleam shone in his eyes. The corners of his mouth curled up in a sneer and his eyes shone with triumph. He had them both trapped.

A cold snicker rumbled in his throat. "I hope you pick the right side, Dash. I would hate for you to die, too."

Saderia's paws scrabbled desperately on the rocky ledge, struggling vainly to pull her up. Pebbles and dirt rained down on her face and her paws slipped on the rocky crags, making her heart skip and tearing a gasp out of her throat. Her broken claws dug frantically into the stone, just barely catching her. All the fur on her back stood on end and her heart pounded wildly with terror. Her back legs dangled helplessly over open air, but she forced herself not to look down. Her wide eyes locked on the top of the ledge. Desperately, she tried to reach up to grab the side and pull herself up. A shriek of alarm tore out of her throat when a dark brown paw clamped down on her own, pinning it to the stone. A blood-streaked, dark brown face appeared over the edge of the platform, making her heart stop in shock.

Her eyes grew wide with disbelief. "D-Dash?"

Dash's wide amber eyes bored into hers. His paw clamped down on hers, holding her to the side of the ledge. Fear and desperation twisted his face and all the color seemed to drain out of him. Desperately, he opened his mouth to speak, then broke off abruptly and whipped his head around to look over his shoulder, his eyes flashing with shock.

Icy, overwhelming cold suddenly swept over both of them, rustling their fur and making Saderia sway dangerously in the air. Shadows swirled over the stony edge of the platform just beside Dash, even darker than the blackness of night. A cold, eerie snickering sound seemed to echo in the air

around them, emanating from the shadows. Slowly, the shadows twisted into a pitch black mane. Dark brown fur appeared out of the darkness. Eerie amber eyes shone through the shadows, gleaming with triumph.

Saderia's eyes widened in horror and her heart stopped. An icy cold froze her entire body. "Y-you..." A shaky gasp tore out of her throat. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Dastarius sneered down at her, his eyes glinting with triumph. "Hello again, Princess."

Saderia gaped up at him in horror. "Dastarius! H...*How?* How are you here?"

Dastarius snickered. The corners of his mouth curled up in a gruesome sneer as he rested his shadowy tail on Dash's shoulder. An eerie light shone in his triumphant amber eyes. Sneering down at her, he whispered in a low, cold voice. "Kill her."

"Dingo!"

A jolt of shock raced through Dingo at the sound of the familiar voice. Whipping his head back to find the source, he skidded to an abrupt halt, sending sand flying up around him. Screams split the air all around him, ringing in his ears. Thick fighting covered the land, staining the sand dark red and making the desert seem hotter than ever. Animals tumbled past him on all sides, slamming up against his shoulders as he froze in place. Dingo's heart pounded wildly with terror and his breath came out in short, harsh gasps. Frantically, he whipped around and scanned the hordes of battling animals surrounding him.

In a flash of dark red fur, a shaggy dingo leapt out from a thick clump of fighting and raced toward him, his yellow eyes wide with alarm. Behind him, a blood-streaked, yellow brown canine stumbled out from a thick patch of fighting dingoes and darted toward him, his pants heavy and his dark brown eyes wide with terror. The instant Dingo whipped around to face them, the two ragged canines skidded to a halt in front of him.

Surprise glowed in Dingo's eyes. "Thunder! Rip!"

Rip's wide, anxious yellow eyes bored into his. "Dingo!" Lashing his tail, he jerked his head in the direction of Rock's monstrous den. "Isn't that your forest food?"

Dingo looked up sharply and felt his heart stop in horror. On the edge of the huge platform jutting out of Rock's den, Saderia clung to the side, her body dangling helplessly over open air. Alarm shot through Dingo. Fear swept over him, even stronger than the terror he had felt when he had first seen her fall from the other side of the camp.

Narrowing his eyes, he whipped around to face Thunder and Rip, his heart hammering in his chest. "Yes, it's her. I'm heading there now. I've got to get up there." A dark sense of determination shadowed his face. "You two are in charge now. Lead the outcasts while I'm gone. Kill everything in sight if you have to. I've got to save Saderia!"

Thunder's eyes widened in alarm. "You...You want *us* to lead the outcasts?"

Rip narrowed his eyes in determination and lashed his tail, ignoring Thunder's words. "We've got it, Dingo. We'll take care of it. You go get your tiger and kill Rock."

Dingo dipped his head, feeling a wave of relief sweep over him. "Thank you."

Rip grinned and flicked him with his tail. "Punch Rock once for me." Giving Dingo one last look, he whipped around and bounded off into the wild fray, leading Thunder away with a flick of his tail. Throwing back his head, Rip let out a loud, echoing howl seconds before he vanished behind a crowd of fighting animals.

Narrowing his eyes, Dingo tore his gaze off the place where his brother had disappeared and whipped around to race toward Rock's towering den. Determination glinted in his light brown eyes and his heart beat faster when he spotted Saderia dangling from the ledge. A low growl rumbled in his throat. Ignoring the lashing claws of the pack members around him, he shoved past pairs of fighting animals in his way. The bloodthirsty howls of the pack members rang in his ears, but he never slowed down. His paws splashed through blood, and pain shot through him whenever an enemy slashed at his sides, but he kept his eyes focused on the shadowy den.

Gritting his teeth, Dingo lunged over a thick crowd of fighters and landed roughly behind them. A dangerous shadow loomed over him, making him look up sharply. His breath left his throat when he saw Rock's ominous den towering right over him. A darker surge of fury rose in his

chest when he spotted Saderia above him, her fur bristling and her claws scraping wildly at the ledge. His eyes narrowed in determination.

Letting out a snarl, he lunged toward the nearest spike, then bounded to the next, never looking down. His paws slammed clumsily against each spike as he lunged from one outcropping to the next, desperate to make it to the top. His heart beat with every jump and his mind whirled. Somehow, he had to make it to the top in time. He couldn't let his best friend die. Not after all they had been through. Not after she had saved him from himself. Not after she had given him something to live for. She couldn't die like this.

The ground below him grew farther and farther away, but he never stopped. His ears pricked when he leapt to one of the tallest spikes jutting out of the den and his heart skipped in alarm. Somewhere above him, a cold, dark voice let out a growl. "Kill her."

Dingo's eyes widened and his heart skipped a beat. Confusion burned in his mind and his paws slipped on a spike, making his heart stop. Quickly, he caught himself and leapt to the next, his mind whirling. Whose voice was that? Another low snarl rumbled from somewhere atop the platform, making his ears flatten and a dangerous growl rise in his throat.

"Go on, Dash." The gruff voice let out a cold chuckle. "Kill her."

Rock. Dingo's eyes narrowed when he recognized the cold voice and a fiery rage burned in his chest. Gritting his teeth, he leapt to the next spike as fast as he could, his heart blazing with determination. He didn't know what was going on atop the ledge, but he did know one thing. No one was going to kill Saderia as long as he was alive.

That, and Rock was his to kill.

Shock rose in Dash's chest, making his heart stop and his eyes widen in disbelief. His father's words rang in his head, sending a chill racing through him. His paws felt suddenly clammy and an icy cold chill spread to every inch of his body, making him feel numb with horror. With wide, stunned eyes, he stared down at Saderia's horrified face, his mind reeling. His mouth opened to speak, but no words came out. An overwhelming sense of pain and betrayal rose in his chest, making the world tilt around him. The same sense of shock and betrayal shone in Saderia's wide amber eyes when he didn't move.

Numbly, Dash stared down at her, then slowly looked down at her paw pinned against the jagged edge of the ledge. His paw tightened around hers.

Dastarius snickered and leaned closer to Dash. “That’s it. Kill her, son. Kill her *now*.”

Dash whipped around and gaped at his father, his eyes wide with horror. All his fur bristled and an icy cold froze his heart as Dastarius’s words sunk in. His mouth gaped open to say something, but no words came out. Betrayal gleamed in his eyes as horrible realization crashed down on him, making his entire world spin. Dastarius had tricked him. Dash had trusted him. He had thought he was helping him. His father *had* helped him. But in the end...it was all a trick. A plot—not to save the forest, but to kill Saderia.

Dizziness swept over him and a horrible sense of pain rose in his throat, making his entire body feel weak. For weeks, he had been tricked. His father must have planned this all along. This entire plan...all their visits together...everything his father had done to help him...all those times he had actually acted like he cared, like a decent father...all of it had been a trick to get Dash to do what he wanted. All of it had been *lies*. Anger and horror shot through him, making his mind whirl. How could he have been so *stupid*?

Weakly, he whirled around to stare down at Saderia’s stunned amber eyes, feeling his heart sink. The betrayal in her eyes burned in his mind, making his head spin. An overwhelming sense of sickness rose in his chest as realization crashed over him.

Beside him, Dastarius let out an impatient snarl. “What are you waiting for? If you kill her, you’ll have all the power. You’ll rule the forest. Everyone will know your name and everyone will know your power. You’ll have everything you ever wanted. *Kill her now!*”

“No!” Dash let out a desperate cry, his eyes wide with horror. “I’ll never do it!”

Dastarius let out a dangerous growl and narrowed his eyes, his amber irises blazing with fury. A dark shadow crossed his face. “I don’t think you have a choice, son.”

Dash blinked in shock, then felt his heart stop as a horrible sense of understanding washed over him. Hardly daring to breathe, he looked

frantically over his shoulder. A cry escaped his throat and a jolt of shock raced through him, nearly making him jump.

Rock stood dangerously close to him, barely a few feet away. A dangerous glint flashed in his dark brown eyes and a cruel snarl rumbled in his throat. "What are you waiting for? Throw her to her death! Then we can continue ruling the forest." A darker shadow flitted across his face and he shot Dash a deadly glare. "Unless you're a traitor."

Dash's eyes widened in horror. His heart stopped, sending a wave of cold washing over him. Realization crashed over him, making him feel numb. A cold sweat broke out on his brow and his paws shook as the situation crashed down over him. If he tried to help Saderia, Rock would throw *him* off the ledge. With Rock so close behind him, he wouldn't have *time* to help Saderia. If he made one move to help her, Rock would throw him off before he even had a chance to pull her up. With Dash dead, Rock would push her off next. Both of them would die! But if he tried to fight Rock, he would be abandoning Saderia. In such a precarious position, all it would take was one slip to send her plummeting to her death. Without him holding her, it would be way too easy for her to fall. And what if Rock weaseled away during the fight just long enough to push her?

Horror blazed in his eyes and his mind whirled with panic. There was no way out. He was *trapped*. Never would he *ever* think of pushing her off the ledge, but if he tried to help her, Rock would kill him, and if he tried to kill Rock, she might fall anyway. Dizziness swept over him. The entire world seemed to rock around him, making him feel nauseous. There were only two options. Either Saderia died, or they both did.

A low growl rumbled in Dingo's throat. Gritting his teeth, he slammed his back paws against the final spike and lunged to the top of the thick, craggy platform. His paws smacked the edge of the rough ledge, but he forced himself not to stumble. With bristling fur and blazing brown eyes, he whipped around and gazed out at the edge of the ledge.

On the edge of the enormous platform, Dash stood peering over the ledge, his eyes wide with horror. A strange shadow haunted Dash's shoulder, barely distinguishable in the blackness of night. Saderia's bloody orange paws clung to the side of the platform in front of Dash, while she

dangled just out of sight. In the center of the craggy ledge, Rock stood with his back turned to Dingo, facing Dash with a cruel, dangerous sneer.

Rage rose in Dingo's throat and his claws scraped against the harsh, ragged platform. A low, furious snarl tore out of his throat. "Hey, Rock!"

Rock's eyes widened and all the fur on his back rose up in alarm. Whipping around, he bared his fangs in a snarl, then broke off abruptly when he saw who stood behind him. Shock flashed in his dark brown eyes and his mouth gaped open in a gasp of disbelief. Alarm shone on his face and he stumbled back, his claws scraping the stone.

A dangerous glint flashed in Dingo's shadowed brown eyes. "Do me a favor, Rock...Say hello to Bone for me." Letting out a furious snarl, he lunged toward Rock to attack.

Howls of fury erupted behind Dash, making him whip around in surprise. His eyes widened in shock and a gasp tore out of his throat when he saw Dingo lunge toward Rock, sending them both tumbling to the craggy platform. Vicious growls rose up from the two dingoes as they rolled across the ledge, their voices thick with hatred. Alarm shone in Dash's eyes. Gaping in shock, he stared at the two dingoes, then froze, his eyes growing even wider when a new realization slammed into him. This was his chance!

Feeling his heart skip a beat, Dash instantly grabbed Saderia's other paw, his heart beating wildly. If Dingo could just hold Rock off long enough for him to help Saderia...

"What are you doing?" Dastarius's furious snarl sliced through his thoughts, making him look up sharply. His father's blazing amber eyes bored into his. "Kill her!"

Dash gritted his teeth and glared up at him, a dangerous snarl rumbling in his throat. "Never! I'll never listen to you!"

Dastarius's eyes widened and a shadow crossed his face. Before Dash's eyes, he vanished in a swirl of shadows, whisked away by an icy wind. A shiver crept down Dash's spine. He blinked once and Dastarius was gone. Only dark, open air hung beside him.

Dash's heart skipped. Narrowing his eyes, he pushed back a dark sense of pain and instantly whipped around to look back at Saderia. Fear flashed on her face when his eyes met hers. Gritting his teeth, Dash leaned down and grabbed her by the scruff, hauling her up as gently as he could. A

soft gasp escaped her throat. Her paws scraped desperately against the side of the ledge. One of her back paws struck the edge. With Dash pulling her up, she gritted her teeth and forced herself over the ledge until all four of her paws stood on the platform. Both of them stumbled back against the stone the instant she crawled over the side. Gasping for breath, Saderia staggered to her feet, her eyes wide with terror. Beside her, Dash scrambled to his paws, his eyes wide and his heart burning with relief.

Before he could speak, Saderia whipped around and let out a gasp. Alarm flashed in her eyes when she spotted Dingo and Rock tumbling across the platform. A shrill gasp escaped her throat and her heart froze. "Dingo! Be careful!"

A deafening howl of pain tore out of Dingo's throat. His back smacked the ledge with a harsh crack, knocking the breath out of his throat and sending pain shooting up his spine. Gritting his teeth, he rolled helplessly across the sharp stones, squeezing his eyes shut when the craggy ruts in the platform tore across his skin. His eyes flew open the instant he rolled to a stop and a fire blazed in their light brown depths. Rock loomed above him, his dark brown eyes flashing with hatred and his fur bristling with rage. Letting out a furious snarl, the shadowy Leader raised a clawed paw and aimed a vicious strike at Dingo's face.

Alarm flashed in Dingo's eyes. His heart skipping, he rolled away seconds before Rock's paw slammed down on the stone where his head had been. Letting out a snarl, Dingo slammed his claws against Rock's leg before he rolled farther away from him. A yelp of alarm tore out of Rock's throat when his paw slipped beneath him. Unbalanced, he stumbled forward, just barely catching himself. While Rock struggled to regain his balance, Dingo rolled around and leapt to his paws all in one swift movement, his eyes gleaming with determination. Before Rock could balance himself, Dingo raked his claws across the bottom of his chin, snapping his head back and tearing his front paws off the ground. A howl of alarm tore out of Rock's chest as he fell backward, his back legs twisting.

A sharp crack rang in the air when Rock's back smacked the ledge. A strangled yelp of pain tore out of his throat and his eyes squeezed shut as he collapsed onto the platform. Wasting no time, Dingo lunged at him, a furious snarl rumbling in his throat. Rock's eyes shot open and a blazing

fury flashed in his dark brown eyes. Seconds before Dingo crashed into him, he kicked up roughly, slamming his back legs into Dingo's belly and sending him flying away. A gasp ripped out of Dingo's chest and his breath left him. Before he could realize what had happened, he soared back into the air, his belly streaked with blood. A booming howl of alarm tore out of his throat as he flew through the air.

Saderia's shrill scream of terror echoed in Dingo's ears a second before his back slammed against the ledge with a thunderous smack. His head snapped back and struck the stone with a sharp crack. The entire rock seemed to shake around him. Pain shot up his spine and a strangled howl tore out of his throat as his body rolled across the craggy ledge. Sharp edges sliced through his fur and tore open the deep wounds already lining his sides, coating the platform in hot, sticky blood. The entire world spun around Dingo and his vision blurred with pain. Gritting his teeth, he desperately grabbed at the deep ridges of the platform to stop himself from rolling, but his claws snapped against the hard stone before he could get a grip. With a vicious crack, his body slammed back against a sharp ridge, sending pain shooting through his body but stopping him in place.

Gasping for breath, Dingo jerked his head up and looked around wildly, his light brown eyes wide with shock. Blood trickled through his fur. All the grisly wounds on his body screamed in pain, making the world tilt. Blinking blood out of his eyes, he staggered to his paws, his claws scrabbling frantically on the sharp ridges of the stone. One of his paws slipped backward and his eyes widened in shock when his bloody leg was met only by open air. Letting out a gasp, he pulled his paw back onto the stone and whipped around just as he stumbled to his paws. A wave of dizziness and fear swept over him.

The left edge of the platform hovered right by his paws. A dizzying drop appeared beside him. Shadowy figures danced across the bloody battlefield below him, seeming tiny from such a distance. Moonlight glinted off the jagged spikes below, making their deadly points seem even more dangerous. Dingo's heart skipped and his eyes widened in alarm. His paws teetered on the very edge of the platform. If he had rolled any farther, he would be dead.

A low growl suddenly rumbled behind him, making Dingo whip around in alarm. Anger flashed in his eyes and a snarl rumbled in his throat

when he saw Rock stumble to his paws in the middle of the ledge. The dusty dark brown Leader whirled around to face him, his eyes flashing with fury. Hate twisted his face into a gruesome snarl and he bared his fangs in a guttural growl of anger. All the fur along his back bristled in rage.

Curling his lip, Rock spat at him and snarled. "I'll make sure you really are dead this time!" Lashing his tail, he bunched his muscles and lunged at Dingo with a furious howl.

Alarm flashed in Dingo's eyes. Gritting his teeth, he tensed his muscles, then leapt away from Rock. Just as the Leader crashed into the stone, Dingo dodged away from him and landed clumsily on the side of him, then whipped around to face him. Triumph lit up his light brown eyes. With a low, cold growl, he raised a paw and started to lash out at him, but Rock twisted around faster than he had expected. Letting out a dangerous snarl, Rock whipped around and grabbed his paw before he could rake his claws across his face.

A yelp of surprise tore out of Dingo's throat. Desperately, he tried to yank his paw away, but Rock drove his thick claws in deep to stop him. A cruel smirk flitted across his face. Before Dingo could free himself, Rock whipped his leg out to the side in one swift movement. Something cracked and fiery pain shot through Dingo's leg, tearing a loud, strangled howl out of his throat. His other legs shook and his vision blurred with pain. Before he could fight or recover, Rock snapped his leg back toward him with one brutal swipe of his paw and let go, sending him stumbling backward with a sharp yelp of pain.

Dingo gritted his teeth in agony and staggered back, his paws stumbling over bloody, jagged ridges in the stone. Pain shot through his legs and he squeezed his eyes shut, letting out a harsh growl. Rock darted after him, a dangerous snarl rumbling in his throat. When Dingo opened his eyes and struggled to stop himself from falling, Rock tore his claws across the side of Dingo's face, snapping his head back and pushing him backwards. Pain stung Dingo's muzzle and blood streaked down his face. A low groan escaped his throat. His paws stumbled back, but Rock chased after him. With flashing eyes, the pack Leader lashed out at Dingo again and again, driving him backward before he could fight back. His claws ripped across Dingo's chest and scored deep scars across his legs. Pain surged through Dingo's body and a harsh yelp of pain escaped his throat.

Before he could try to attack, Rock let out a thunderous snarl and lunged toward him. With one harsh swipe of his paws, he slammed his claws across Dingo's legs, sweeping them out from underneath him.

Dingo's eyes widened in alarm and a shrill yelp tore out of his throat. Unbalanced, he collapsed face-first onto the ledge and winced when his head smacked the rough stone. His legs snapped out at awkward angles and his wounds seared with pain. Gasping for breath, Dingo forced himself to raise his head, his light brown eyes stunned. Alarm shot through him when Rock towered over him, his face shadowed with hatred and his eyes glittering with triumph. Dingo's eyes widened and a jolt of fear shot through him. Letting out a yelp, he rolled away as fast as he could. Rock's paw slammed into the jagged rock behind him. A furious growl tore out of Rock's throat and he whipped around to chase him. Narrowing his eyes, Dingo hastily rolled away and leapt to his paws.

Rock's paw shot out at him, but Dingo lunged away before he could strike him. Gritting his teeth, he leapt away from the dark Leader and raced across the blood-spattered rock, his sides heaving with pants. The second his paws reached the right edge of the thick platform, he whipped around and glared back at Rock, his fangs bared in a snarl. A dangerous growl rumbled in his throat and his light brown eyes flashed with fury. Blood streaked through his filthy brown fur and dripped onto the rock, but he ignored the pain stinging his grisly wounds. His sides heaved with heavy pants, but his heart blazed with strength. His tail lashed furiously back and forth and his claws scraped the stone.

On the other side of the huge platform, Rock whipped around to face him. Hatred gleamed in his dark brown eyes, but a cruel sneer curled up the corners of his mouth. Blood trickled down his face and pants shuddered out of his chest, but he barely seemed to notice. His eyes bored into Dingo's, blazing with fury and glittering with triumph. A cold chuckle escaped his throat at the sight of Dingo's bloody appearance.

"Trying to save your forest food, Dingo? I'm sure that'll work well for you. I'm sure you'll be able to save them...about as well as you saved Claw."

Dingo narrowed his eyes and bared his fangs in a furious snarl. Anger burned in his chest and his eyes flashed with fury. His claws scraped across the stone.

Rock snickered. “Those were good times. Bone and I got quite the chuckle out of killing that stupid little sister of yours. And even before then, we got a good laugh watching her stumble around, sick from poison. I can imagine her little trip to the Snake Pit would have been pretty fun to watch, too. Too bad I didn’t get to see that.”

Rage boiled Dingo’s blood and a dangerous snarl tore out of his throat. His claws dug into the rocky crags. Fury bubbled in his chest, making his legs feel shaky with anger.

Rock sneered. “Guess you get to sit back and watch again, Dingo. Last time, you got to watch Bone kill Claw. This time, you’ll get to see me kill your forest food.”

Dingo bared his fangs in a thunderous snarl. “Not if I kill you first!” Bunching his muscles, he lunged at Rock, his claws flashing in the moonlight.

Rock let out a furious growl and leapt at him at the same time, his fur bristling with hatred. The two dingoes slammed into each other in midair with a deafening crack. Dingo’s claws flashed across Rock’s side and the Leader’s claws raked his shoulder as they fell away from each other and tumbled to the ledge. Dingo’s bloody belly smacked the craggy rock, making him wince. Behind him, Rock slammed onto the platform and rolled onto his side, a low groan escaping his throat. Blood spilled out of his side.

Fiery rage boiled Dingo’s blood. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to his paws, ignoring the ridges tearing across his belly. With blazing brown eyes, he whipped around and lunged at Rock, a furious snarl tearing out of his throat. Instantly, Rock staggered to his paws and whipped around, his eyes widening in shock. Before Rock could react, Dingo tore his claws across his muzzle. A cry escaped Rock’s throat and he stumbled backward, his face dripping with blood. Dingo chased him, never letting up. Gritting his teeth, he lashed out again and again, driving Rock back. His claws scored his chest, his face, and his legs, splattering the platform with blood. Letting out a snarl, he raised a paw and aimed at Rock’s face to land the final blow that would send him sprawling onto the stone.

Rock’s eyes shot up to his face and fiery fury blazed in their dark brown depths. In a flash, he grabbed Dingo’s paw with his own, letting out a furious snarl. Alarm glowed in Dingo’s eyes. Instantly, he yanked his paw

out of Rock's grip and staggered backward, unbalanced. Moving faster than Dingo could have imagined, Rock lunged at him the instant he stumbled back. His fangs clamped down hard on Dingo's leg, tearing a sharp howl from his throat. Before he could fight back, Rock sunk his fangs in, then yanked his leg to the side. Shock shone in Dingo's eyes when his paws left the ground. With one powerful swing, Rock whipped him around and sent him flying away, blood pouring from his leg.

A deafening howl of alarm tore out of Dingo's throat. His body twisted helplessly as wind flew past his fur, stinging his wounds. Time seemed to slow down. Before he could realize what was happening, his back slammed the rough platform and snapped, drawing out a sharp howl of pain. His body tumbled across the stone, rolling too quickly to stop. Ridges tore into his skin, sending waves of pain crashing over him. His bloody sides smacked the stone over and over again, then...nothing. His body shot out over open air, making his heart stop. The ledge ended, sending him plummeting off the side of the rock.

A howl of fear escaped his throat. Desperately, he twisted in the air and reached out, struggling to find something to grab onto. Hard rock struck his paws, snapping his body in midair and just barely catching him. His breath caught in his throat. His paws clung desperately to the edge of the platform, but the rest of him dangled helplessly over open air. Fear shot through him. The ground spiraled hundreds of feet below him, making him feel dizzy. The spikes beneath the platform seemed to inch closer to him, their points jagged. Dingo flattened his ears and let out a shaky breath, trying to swallow his fear.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to look back up at the ledge. Desperation flashed in his eyes. Frantically, he pulled himself up and dug his claws into the rock on the top of the platform. Inching his paws along the craggy ledge, he struggled to pull himself up, his back legs searching wildly for anything to grab onto. His head appeared over the edge of the ledge and his claws clung roughly to the craggy ridges. Fearful pants heaved out of his chest. Hardly daring to breathe, he started to pull himself over the ledge, then froze.

A shadow loomed over him. Dingo's eyes darted upward and his heart stopped. Fear swept over him, making his eyes open wide. Rock towered over him, a triumphant sneer on his face and a dangerous glint in

his dark brown eyes. The Leader let out a cold snicker and raised a paw to bring it down on Dingo's legs. Dingo's breath caught and his entire body froze in fear. With a low growl, Rock started to bring his paw down, but before he could throw Dingo to his death, a deafening howl erupted behind him. A flash of yellow brown fur leapt over Rock and slammed down on top of him, tearing a sharp howl of surprise out of the Leader's throat.

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. Letting out a howl of pain, Rock staggered backward, rearing back to throw off his attacker. Tumbling backward, the Leader disappeared from sight, snarling furiously. Amazement glittered in Dingo's light brown eyes and his heart skipped to life. Taking in a sharp gasp of air, Dingo dug his claws into the craggy stone and kicked out wildly with his back feet, struggling to pull himself up. At last, his back paws struck hard stone. Gritting his teeth, he reached up and hauled himself clumsily over the edge, his heart hammering in his chest. Staggering out on top of the wide platform, he shook himself, then looked up sharply when a howl rang in his ears.

Shock shone in his eyes and his heart skipped a beat. "*Thunder?*"

The yellow brown outcast rolled across the craggy platform and leapt to his paws, his dark brown eyes blazing. Wincing in pain, Rock let out a dangerous growl and whipped around to face him. Before Rock could even look at him, though, Thunder whipped out a paw and drove his claws across Rock's cheek, snapping his head back. A loud yelp tore out of Rock's throat, but Thunder didn't stop. Gritting his teeth, he chased Rock when he stumbled backward and lashed out over and over again, driving him back. Every time Rock winced, Thunder slashed at him, splattering the platform with blood.

A furious snarl tore out of Thunder's chest. Baring his fangs, he lurched forward and slammed his paws into Rock's legs, sweeping them out from under him. With a strangled yelp of alarm, Rock started to fall forward. Before he hit the ledge, Thunder lunged and smacked into him, burying his claws in his shoulders. Letting out a dangerous snarl, Thunder pushed him backward and smacked Rock's back against the stone. The pack Leader winced and squeezed his eyes shut, a low growl rumbling in his chest. Thunder's paws smacked down on his shoulders, slamming him up against the stony platform.

A growl rumbled in Thunder's throat and his eyes flashed. His claws drove into Rock's shoulders and he bared his fangs over his face, letting out a dangerous snarl.

Blinking his eyes open, Rock stared up at Thunder with a shadowed face, then slowly let a sneer curl up the corners of his mouth. The Leader snickered and leered up at the outcast, raising an eyebrow. "Are you going to kill me, Thunder? *You?*" When Thunder hesitated, he laughed in his face and shot him a haughty glare. "Well, traitor? Are you going to get your pathetic little revenge for exiling you or not?"

Thunder gritted his teeth, his dark brown eyes blazing with hatred. His paws shook on Rock's shoulders and a growl rumbled in his chest, but his harsh glare wavered. The fire slowly died from his eyes and fear crossed his face. Desperately, he bared his fangs at Rock, but his eyes gleamed with horror and indecision. "I...I...I can't..."

Rock's eyes flashed with triumph and a gruesome smirk spread across his face. "What's this? You're too scared to kill me?" He snorted and curled his lip in a mocking sneer, angling his ears toward Dingo. "You're just like your pathetic idol over there."

Thunder's eyes widened in horror and he drew away from Rock as if he had been smacked. Fear shone in his eyes and his face twisted with panic. His paws shook on Rock's shoulders and he sputtered helplessly, as if he couldn't think clearly. "I...I..."

Rock sneered a grisly sneer and leaned closer to Thunder, dropping his voice to a cold whisper. "You might not be able to kill me, Thunder. But guess what?" A bloody smirk crossed his face. "I can kill you!" With a wild laugh, he kicked his paws up roughly at Thunder's chest, making the outcast gasp in surprise. Rock's claws smacked his face and the pack Leader shoved Thunder away with one quick kick, sending him staggering backward, unbalanced.

A loud yelp of alarm tore out of Thunder's throat and his eyes squeezed shut when his back smacked the rough stone. In an instant, Rock leapt to his paws and whipped around to face the fallen outcast, his eyes blazing with triumph. Before Thunder could roll away, Rock slammed a paw down on his stomach and drove his claws in. A sneer crossed his face when Thunder let out a strangled howl of pain. Leering down at Thunder,

Rock bared his fangs and lunged toward his throat with a loud howl of triumph.

“Get away from him!” Dingo bared his fangs in a furious snarl and lunged at Rock just as his fangs sank into Thunder’s neck. His paws slammed into Rock’s side, sending him stumbling away from Thunder with a loud yelp of alarm. Knocked off balance, Rock tumbled to the ground, bringing Dingo down with him. The two canines crashed against the rugged stone and rolled across the bloody platform. Behind them, Thunder let out a shaky gasp and leapt to his paws, staring at them with wide eyes and bristling fur.

Not wasting a moment, Dingo rolled away from Rock and leapt to his paws, baring his fangs in a dangerous snarl. The pack Leader frantically scrambled to his paws and whipped around to face him, but before he could regain his balance, Dingo raked his claws across his leg. Rock let out a yelp and staggered clumsily backward. Gritting his teeth, he tried to swipe at Dingo, but Dingo instantly ducked down to avoid the attack. Before Rock could lash out again, Dingo tore his claws across the Leader’s face, hearing a sharp crack in his jaw. Howling in pain, Rock staggered backward, his cheek wet with blood.

Dingo never once stopped. Letting out a snarl, he stalked after him, lashing out with his claws over and over again. With quick, vicious swipes, he drove Rock back toward the enormous stones forming the entrance to his dark den at the back of the platform. Blindly, Rock swiped at him with a growl, but Dingo dodged away from his attacks easily and slammed his claws across his face, making him wince and stumble backward. His claws raked across Rock’s chest, legs, and face, never once stopping. Letting out a furious snarl, Rock lunged toward him and desperately lashed out with a brutal swipe of his paw, but before his attack could land, Dingo caught his paw and drove his claws into his skin.

Shock gleamed in Rock’s eyes and a strangled yelp of alarm escaped his throat. Before he could yank his paw away, Dingo tightened his grip, then yanked his paw out to the side as hard as he could, snapping his leg with a harsh crack. Rock’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped open in a deafening howl of pain. When Dingo dropped his leg, Rock stumbled clumsily toward his den. Desperately, he tried to steady himself, but the second his injured paw touched the ledge and tried to hold him up, he let

out a strangled yelp of pain. His legs collapsed and he smacked onto the platform, his face twisting with pain.

Dingo stalked toward him while Rock scrambled desperately to his paws. A low growl rumbled in Dingo's throat and a shadow crept across his light brown eyes. "You're never going to hurt another animal again, Rock."

Rock's eyes shot up to his face, gleaming with alarm. Frantically, he stumbled to his feet and backed away, swaying shakily on only three legs. Fear flitted across his face as he staggered back toward his dark den. Narrowing his eyes, he bared his fangs, hiding his unease.

Dingo stalked after him, his eyes dark and his face shadowed with a grave, dangerous expression. "Do you know why, Rock? Because *I* can kill *you*."

A flicker of fear shone in Rock's eyes and he staggered backward, his long, dusty dark brown fur bristling wildly. Gritting his teeth, he glared at Dingo and tried to force himself to balance. Curling his lip, he shot Dingo a cool glance and raised an eyebrow, hiding the fear in his eyes. "*You* can kill me?" He snorted and let out a derisive chuckle. "Well, well... You're turning into quite the murderer, aren't you, Dingo?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Dingo narrowed his eyes and crept closer, his shadowed brown eyes flashing grimly. "Isn't it funny how things work out sometimes?"

Rock's haughty gaze faltered and worry crept into his dark brown eyes. Anxiously, he stumbled backward. When Dingo stalked after him, he desperately lashed out with his injured paw. Instantly, Dingo batted it away, making Rock let out a yelp of pain. Barely catching himself, the pack Leader staggered back, his eyes growing wide with alarm.

"Now let's talk about this, Dingo. You don't want another murder on your conscience, do you?" Rock's eyes flicked wildly back and forth, searching for any exit or any sign of his followers. His eyes locked on the edge of the rock where Saderia and Dash stood, facing him with dark, stony glares. A few feet away, Thunder watched him with narrowed eyes. Alarm flitted into Rock's eyes when he realized he was outnumbered.

At the sound of Dingo's cold paw steps, Rock whipped back around, his face twisting in alarm. A nervous chuckle escaped his throat. "You... You can't kill me, Dingo. You don't even know me." His paws stumbled nervously over the ridges. Fear shone in his eyes. Sweat dripped down his

face and his words spilled out in a wild rush. "With Bone, I mean, it was personal...I mean, you had every right...But me...I didn't really...I mean...I..." His voice broke off and his eyes widened in terror when Dingo stepped closer. Flattening his ears, Rock desperately stumbled away, his breath coming out in short gasps. His wide brown eyes met Dingo's and his voice shook with desperation. "I...I never should have done anything to you, Dingo. It was all a mistake! Bone made me do it, I swear! He was evil, just like you said!" Sweat poured down his face. "You were right to kill him, Dingo, really, but not me! I didn't know any better! I..."

"You're going to stand there and beg for your pathetic life and tell me it was okay to kill *your* friend, who you spent all this time trying to avenge, just to save yourself?" Dingo curled his lip and shook his head in disgust. "You're even more pathetic than he was." Narrowing his eyes, he stalked closer to Rock, his face shadowed and dark. "Got anything else to say about your so-called best friend before I send you to meet him?"

Rock staggered back and froze in horror when his back brushed up against the hard rocks of his den, trapping him between Dingo and the stones. Terror glowed in his dark brown eyes and his breath heaved out of his chest in short, frantic pants. "Wait!" he gasped. "Wait! Dingo...if you let me go...I'll never cause trouble again! I swear! You can have the pack! You can rule the desert! You can have whatever you want! I'll never bother you again!"

"I don't want to rule the desert." Dingo narrowed his eyes in a dangerous glare. "And what makes you think I would believe you anyway?" Before Rock could speak, Dingo swept his front paws out from under him. With a sharp cry of alarm, Rock crashed onto the stone. The instant his belly hit the platform, Dingo rolled him onto his side and slammed a paw down on Rock's neck, holding him down. A dangerous glint flashed in his eyes. "Enough excuses, Rock. You should have thought about the consequences before you tortured Karenisha and me, before you hurt Saderia and Dash, and before you made it your life's goal to destroy everyone you could." His eyes narrowed in a dark glare. "It's like you said to me in the prison, Rock. You'll pay for what you've done."

Rock's eyes widened in horror. "You're crazy!"

"Yep. And you shouldn't mess with crazies, Rock." Without another word, Dingo bared his fangs and lunged toward Rock's throat. Before Rock

could react, Dingo drove his fangs into his neck until he tasted blood. A deafening howl tore out of Rock's throat and he thrashed wildly, then slowly started to struggle less and less. The screams echoing from the battlefield gradually drowned out his howl until it died away. The pack Leader's dark brown eyes rolled back, glazed and lifeless, and his body went still. Rock was dead.

Silence crept over the platform, seeming to drown out the screams below. Slowly, Dingo stepped away from Rock's blood-streaked body, his eyes shadowed. Blood dripped from his fangs. Narrowing his eyes, Dingo carefully stepped back, his expression cold and unreadable. All eyes turned to him, boring into his bloody fur. Slowly, Dingo turned and gazed out at the three animals around him, his eyes clouded and hollow.

His gaze flicked first to Thunder. The outcast stared up at him with stunned dark brown eyes, his fur bristling and his mouth gaping open in incredulity. Dingo's eyes flew past him to the dark brown lion standing a few feet away. On the edge of the ledge, Dash stared at Dingo, his face shadowed. A dark sense of disquiet haunted his amber eyes despite his emotionless façade. At last, Dingo's eyes flicked to Saderia. Her wide amber eyes glimmered with shock in the dim light and her fur bristled, but a faint sense of hope shone on her face. Slowly, she looked up and met Dingo's darkened gaze.

Dingo gazed back at her for a long moment, then dipped his head and closed his eyes. "It's over. The war is won. Rock is dead."

Overwhelming relief crashed over Saderia as his words sunk in. Her legs shook beneath her and a shaky gasp escaped her throat, weak and soft with incredulity. It was over. Finally, the war was over. The pack's Leader lay dead atop his own den. The battle and all the pain it had caused was finally at its end. The outcasts were free. Karenisha was finally safe and out of Rock's clutches. Soon, Saderia would be able to bring her mother back to her home. The forest was hers again. The war had been won. Freedom had won.

Her eyes misted over with relief. Her legs shook and the world seemed to tilt around her, making her feel dizzy, as if she could hardly believe it. Letting out a soft sigh, she sat back and closed her eyes. A sense of peace rose in her heart, drowning out the pain of her wounds and the exhaustion haunting her body. Finally, she was free again.

Tearing his gaze off Saderia, Dingo slowly turned around to face Thunder, his shadowed brown eyes glimmering with worry. "Thunder? Are you okay?"

Thunder blinked in shock and stared at him for a long moment. His mouth opened to speak, but no words came out. Shaking himself, he stared at Dingo in awe, his legs shaking and his dark brown eyes wide with amazement. "I...I'm fine." He paused, then winced and glanced uncomfortably down at his paws, his eyes clouded. "I...I'm sorry. I just... couldn't do it."

Dingo's gaze softened and he heaved a weary sigh. "It's okay, Thunder. I understand. Just relax. Everything's okay now."

Thunder closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Blinking open his eyes, he paused, then stepped closer to Dingo, his dark brown irises wide with incredulity. "Th-thank you," he stammered, his voice thick with awe. "You...you saved us. All of us. We...we're *free* now."

Dingo managed a weak smile and nodded, his gaze gentle. "You don't have to worry about the pack anymore, Thunder. No one will ever hurt you or your friends ever again. You all are outcasts no longer. *You* rule the desert now."

Thunder's eyes widened in amazement and he let out a shaky breath, as if hardly daring to believe it. Relief shone in his dark brown eyes and his bloody, yellow brown paws shook beneath him. Dingo could practically read the thoughts racing through his mind. No longer would Thunder or any of the other outcasts have to look over both shoulders for any sign of enemies. No longer would they be prisoners in their own home. No longer would they have to fear for their lives every second of the day. They were safe. They were *free*.

A faint smile crossed his face. Tearing his eyes off Thunder's stunned gaze, Dingo slowly turned to face the edge of the rock and met Saderia's glowing amber irises. The relief in her eyes seemed to push away the shadow haunting his face. A faint glow of happiness shone in his eyes. Giving her a warm smile, he stepped toward the edge of the blood-streaked platform and pressed against her, his light brown irises twinkling in the dim light.

"Come on," he murmured, giving her a gentle nudge. "Let's end this."

Saderia gazed up at him and nodded, a smile creeping across her face. Side by side, they turned around and gazed out at the shadowed camp below them. As Saderia watched, a glimmer of light sparked on the horizon. Slowly, brilliant rays of sunlight shot out across the desert, dashing away the shadows and casting shining light down on the bloody camp. Relief shone in Saderia's eyes as the light glinted off the edge of the rock and warmed her bloody fur. The nightmare was over. The horrors she had witnessed, the terror of Rock's reign, the fear the dark Leader had instilled...all of it was over.

Together, Saderia and Dingo stood on the very edge of the platform. Side by side, they threw back their heads and let out a deafening roar and an echoing howl that burst out over the camp and made every fighter freeze in their tracks. Slowly, the screams and howls of battle died away. All eyes turned to the two of them as a wave of sunlight washed over the rock, lighting up their fur. Their voices echoed out over the silent camp.

"Rock is dead! His pack's reign of terror is over. We have won the war! The outcasts are outcasts no more. The Queen is safe. The forest belongs to its rightful owners once again." A brilliant glow lit up their amber and light brown eyes. "Freedom is ours!"

Chapter Thirty-Six

The True Leader

Silence swept over the entire camp. The screams died away as the fighters tore away from the battle. Every eye turned up to Saderia and Dingo, glimmering with shock. Deafening silence hung over the camp. Then, all at once, a thundering cacophony of cheers burst through the silence. Forest animals leapt up into the air, shouting with excitement. Outcasts threw back their heads and howled, their voices thick with joy. Their deafening cheers rang in the air, echoing around the entire desert. Forest animals and outcasts pressed against each other to relax or high-fived each other all around camp. Other animals collapsed onto the ground, weeping with relief. The sun rose high in the lightening blue sky, casting brilliant rays out over the camp and chasing away the last few hints of darkness.

Rock's remaining pack members gazed around at the cheering army, their eyes wide with shock and horror. One by one, each of them darted away from the camp and raced off into the desert as fast as their paws could carry them, never once looking back. Soon, only the victors remained in the blood-spattered camp, racing toward friends, crying out with relief, and raising their voices in wild, jubilant cheers.

Saderia gazed out at the euphoric camp, her amber eyes shining brilliantly in the bright light. A dazzling smile spread across her face and a warm sense of relief rose in her chest, easing the pain of her wounds. Slowly, she gazed around at the camp, then looked back at her companions with glowing amber eyes. Dingo stood close beside her, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. His light brown eyes shimmered in the sunlight, casting away the darkness that had haunted his gaze. Behind them, Thunder stood near the middle of the rock, his dark brown eyes wide with awe and his expression dreamy and amazed. Saderia smiled to herself, then turned and gazed to her right. Her eyes darkened and her smile faltered when she saw Dash standing a few paces away from her.

The dark lion gazed off into the distance instead of down at the triumphant camp. A dark shadow haunted his face and his eyes seemed unfocused, glimmering with horror and pain. His fur bristled in the warm gaze of the sun and his paws trembled against the stone. He seemed to be staring off into the distance at something that only he could see.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and frowned. A dark sense of wonder rose in her chest as she stared at her best friend. Questions swirled through her mind and a shadow crossed her face. What exactly was going on with him? What had he been doing behind her back? Unease crept into her eyes, but she quickly shook her worries off. Heaving a sigh, she tapped him with her tail and frowned when he jumped and whirled around in alarm.

His head whipped around and his eyes met hers, their amber depths gleaming with fear and dismay. "Saderia..." he choked out. "I..."

She rested her tail on his shoulder to cut him off. Letting out a sigh, she sternly met his gaze. "I want to know what's been going on. But we can talk about it later."

Dash sighed and gave her a weak nod, his eyes narrowed with nervousness. "Okay." He paused, then dropped his voice to a soft, barely audible whisper. "I'm sorry."

Saderia just nodded and turned away, feeling a slight shiver race down her spine. What exactly was he apologizing for? What exactly had he kept from her? Shaking off her unease, she gazed back out at the camp and felt her worries disappear. A smile spread across her face before she could fight it, lifting her heart and easing her worries.

Animals leapt up all around camp, howling with triumph. Dingoes and forest animals alike pressed close to each other, clapping each other on the back and congratulating their comrades. Their cheerful cries filled the entire desert. All around camp, animals leapt into the air and shouted at the top of their lungs or collapsed with relief. Friends pressed against each other, some leaning against each other for support. Everyone in the camp raised their voices in triumph. When Saderia's gaze fell on two familiar faces just beneath the towering den, an overwhelming surge of joy swept over her, nearly knocking her off her feet. At the front of the camp sat Makero. Leaning against him and gazing around with wide, amazed amber eyes was Karenisha.

Relief burned in Saderia's heart and her entire body felt suddenly weak with happiness. A shaky sigh breathed out of her chest. "Mom," she whispered. "She's safe."

Dash gazed down at the front of the camp and managed a weak smile, though his eyes remained shadowed. "That's a relief."

Saderia took a deep breath, her amber irises shining with a powerful, otherworldly glow. The warm light of the sun turned her amber eyes to pure gold. A dazzling glow seemed to shine out from her fur, sparkling from her paws and shimmering around her face. The blood coating her body seemed to fade with the golden glow and her wounds seemed to stop stinging the instant the shine touched them. The words of the ancient royal prophecy rang in Saderia's ears, bringing a warm, proud smile to her face. *The daughter of the fiftieth generation...Heart, Crown, Scepter, Eye, and Dreams...*

Her eyes sparkled in the brilliant glow. "We won..." Shaking her head and smiling a shaky smile, she closed her eyes and threw back her head. "**We won!**"

Wild, exuberant roars and howls echoed out around the camp as soon as the words left her mouth, ringing brilliantly in her ears. Paw steps sounded on the rock behind her as the cries rang out around camp, making Saderia prick her ears. Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled when she saw Thunder hesitantly creep up behind them.

The yellow brown canine stepped closer and paused behind them, his dark brown eyes shining with amazement and his gaze dream-like, as if he couldn't believe what had happened. When Saderia, Dash, and Dingo turned to face him, Thunder dipped his head low, his eyes shining with gratitude. "Thank you," he whispered. "Without all of your help, all of the outcasts would be dead." He slowly looked up at Saderia and Dash and met their gazes with shining dark brown eyes. "Thank you, Princess Saderia and Prince Dash, for forgetting our pasts and taking us in in our hour of need. Thank you for helping us win this fight." Thunder paused, then slowly turned and gazed up at Dingo, his eyes glowing with awe and incredulity. "And thank you, Dingo, for helping me lead the outcasts to victory. Without you, we wouldn't have stood a chance. Thank you for forgiving us and for being our leader when we needed a guide. Thank you for everything you've done."

Dingo gave him a warm smile and lightly flicked his tail. "You don't need to thank me, Thunder. I was glad to help."

"Me too. And you're not outcasts anymore," Saderia added, a brilliant smile shining on her face. "You're free now. *You* rule the desert."

A hint of unease shimmered in Thunder's eyes at her words, but he managed a weak smile and nodded warmly. "That's wonderful...and amazing. But..." He hesitated, then looked up with a sheepish smile. "I...I don't think I can be the dingoes' Leader anymore. I'm not cut out for it. I can lead the dingoes fine when things are going well, but in times of crisis...I just don't know what to do. I'm not the right animal for the job."

Dingo's eyes glittered with sympathy and he rested his paw gently on Thunder's shoulder. "I don't think you can resign from Leadership, Thunder, but...I suppose if you really don't want to continue being their Leader, you could appoint someone else, especially considering you were just thrown into this position from the start. Right now, the dingoes need someone strong to lead them back to their camp and celebrate their victory. I think you can do that. Later on, maybe you can pass your duty onto someone else."

A slow smile spread across Thunder's face. "I don't think I should wait that long, Dingo. But you're right. The dingoes do need someone strong to lead them, both now and for the rest of their lives. They need a wise, brave Leader who knows what he's doing."

Dingo blinked in surprise, but managed a faint smile. Behind them, the cheers slowly started to die down. Tearing her eyes off Thunder, Saderia gazed down at the camp, while her two friends turned to face the crowd. Excitement still shone in the eyes of the animals below them, but their cheers slowly grew quieter. Most of the forest animals still cheered with friends, but the cheers of the dingoes slowly faded away. Several canines cast anxious glances at one another, their faces shadowed with unease and a twinge of alarm. Nervous murmurs rose up from the crowds of dingoes. A few of them cast anxious glances up at the rock, then whispered to each other in soft, indistinguishable voices.

One of the dingoes nervously stepped forward and gazed up at the ledge, his eyes narrowed in confusion. "Who...Who's going to be Leader now?" he shouted.

Another dingo shot him a stern glare. “Thunder, you idiot! Who else?”

The first speaker shrank back and flattened his ears in embarrassment. “I don’t know. I just...I didn’t know if Thunder would keep leading or if someone else would take over...” His voice trailed off and he uncomfortably looked away. “Never mind...”

“No. It’s a good question.”

The anxious whispers of the dingoes instantly cut off at the sound of the soft voice. Every canine whipped around to stare up at the ledge, their eyes wide with surprise and bewilderment. The cheers and whispers slowly died away to a tense, curious silence.

Thunder stepped up to the edge of the platform and gazed down at the camp, his dark brown eyes shining and a weak smile on his face. Every dingo stared up at him in amazement as he took a deep, shaky breath and raised his voice to be heard. “My pack...I have enjoyed being your Leader for these past few months and I am grateful that you put so much faith in me, but I am not the best Leader for you. I’m sure many of you know that as well as I do. Now that you are free, you all deserve the best Leader you could possibly have.” Thunder’s eyes shone brilliantly in the sunlight. “I think someone else should be your Leader, someone who can start a new generation of the pack and change it for the better.”

One of the dingoes let out a wild, exuberant shout. “Dingo for Leader!”

Dingo’s eyes widened in surprise and his gaze instantly flicked to the crowd. When his eyes fell on the dingo who had spoken and he recognized Rip’s wild, grinning face, he rolled his eyes in good humor, then froze. Shock flickered into his eyes when cheers suddenly rose up from the crowd of canines.

Every dingo in camp rose to their paws and let out a shout, their eyes shimmering with excitement. Their words rang out in the air as every canine lifted their voice in a bright, eager chant. “Dingo for Leader! Dingo for Leader!”

Dingo gaped in shock, his light brown eyes growing wide with amazement. Disbelief shone on his face.

Thunder grinned at his stunned expression, his dark brown eyes glittering knowingly in the bright sunlight. Smiling warmly, the previous

outcast Leader gazed out at the crowd with glowing brown eyes and raised his voice to be heard over the chanting of the new pack. "I think Dingo should be the new Leader of the pack!"

Wild cheers erupted through the camp, echoing in the peaceful air and ringing in Dingo's ears. All around camp, dingoes howled with excitement. Some of the canines even leapt into the air to shout their approval. Excitement and hope glowed in their eyes and bright smiles warmed their faces. All of them gazed up at the ledge with shining, eager eyes, their voices rising into a deafening cheer that echoed out over the entire desert.

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. His mouth gaped open and his eyes glittered with disbelief as every dingo threw back their head and howled with excitement. All the fur on his back rose up in shock and his flicking tail froze in midair. Frozen in place, Dingo gaped at the crowd in awe, never once blinking or daring to look away, as if afraid that the scene might disappear. Slowly, he blinked his eyes, then abruptly jerked his head back to look at Thunder, his light brown irises shimmering with shock and confusion.

Thunder smiled back at him with shining, eager brown eyes. "What do you say?"

Dingo blinked several times, as if not comprehending. "I..." His voice trailed off and his eyes widened in shock when the howls of the pack abruptly died away. All around camp, dingoes eagerly quieted and gazed up at the ledge with hopeful, expectant eyes, pricking their ears to hear his answer. Speechless, Dingo gazed at the crowds of eager canines waiting tensely for his answer, his expression dazed and incredulous. Slowly, he glanced back at Thunder, his eyes stunned and bewildered. "I..." He blinked several times and shook his head in disbelief. "I can't be Leader! I...I'm not cut out for it!"

"Yes, you are." Saderia flicked him lightly with her tail and offered him a warm smile. "What do you think you were doing the whole time you were leading the dingoes?"

"I...that was different!" Dingo protested, his voice flabbergasted. "I mean...I didn't...I can't..." He shook his head furiously and whipped around to stare at Thunder with eyes wide with disbelief. "Why would you want *me* to be Leader anyway?"

Thunder's gaze softened and his eyes glowed knowingly in the brilliant light. "Because you survived, despite all the odds. Because you stood up for what you believed in and never backed down, despite everything we did to you, despite all the horrors you had to live through, despite the fact that it nearly killed you. Because you had the courage to leap up on that stage in the forest to take my place and lead the dingoes, knowing there was a chance it might not work. Because you had the bravery and the intelligence to lead the dingoes into battle and command them to victory when no one else could. Because you risked your life over and over again for your friends, for the cause, and for animals that nearly destroyed you just to save your friends and everyone else from Rock's tyranny." Thunder's eyes glimmered with pride. "I can't think of anyone better suited for the job."

Dingo blinked in surprise and glanced at the crowd, his eyes wide with shock. The entire world seemed to spin and he put a paw to his forehead, his mind whirling. "This is insane." He shook his head slowly and gazed out at the crowd with stunned brown eyes. "I...I would have never thought...I could never have imagined..." He narrowed his eyes and tore his gaze off the dingoes to look back at Thunder, his eyes wide with disbelief. "I never *wanted* to be Leader, Thunder. I just wanted to help you guys. I just...I just wanted to..."

"Change the pack?" Dash looked up and managed a weak smile when Dingo whipped around to stare at him. A knowing gleam lit up Dash's amber eyes and he offered him a faint grin. "You did it, Dingo. Your dream finally came true. You got to change the pack. And now you have the chance to make that change permanent and to make sure that every dingo in the desert gets a fair chance in life. If you become their Leader, you'll be able to help them every day for the rest of your life. Just like you always dreamed."

Dingo's mouth gaped open in shock and he stared at him in incredulity. A dreamy, clouded look crept into his light brown eyes. After several heartbeats of silence, he let out a soft, stunned whisper, as if he could hardly dare to believe it. "I...I changed the pack?"

"Yes, you did." Saderia rested her paw on his shoulder and smiled. "You were an example to the outcasts. Without you, they would have never known any better. You gave them someone to look up to. Once they all

realized the truth about the old pack, they struggled to survive. The example you set for them is what gave them the will to live, to believe there was something worth living for. Those dingoes *would* have died had you not helped them. Without you, none of them would be here, cheering over their victory. You changed the pack and you saved their lives. You're the one who fought for your beliefs despite all the trouble you encountered. You're an example to every other dingo in the desert."

Dingo blinked several times and gazed out at the crowd, his stunned eyes wide with amazement. His light brown irises remained clouded and astonished and he slowly shook his head, as if unable to believe it. "Thunder? You actually want *me* to be Leader?"

Thunder grinned and nodded to the crowds of dingoes. "I think they all do."

Dingo's eyes flicked to Thunder's face and shone with shock before darting back to the dingoes below him. All the dingoes in the camp stared back at him, holding their breath and watching him with wide, hopeful eyes. Dingo stared back at them in awe, his eyes wide with amazement. He blinked several times, wondering if he was in a dream. Time itself seemed to stop and a tense silence spread through the camp as every dingo waited for his response, never taking their eyes off his face. Dingo's eyes widened in amazement, then slowly, a deep sense of determination dawned in his light brown irises. Slowly, he closed his mouth and narrowed his eyes, shaking off his awe. His confusion disappeared and a fiery look of determination flitted across his face, lighting up his eyes. Taking a deep breath, Dingo slowly stepped up to the edge of the platform and gazed down at the dingoes with glowing light brown eyes. "Do all of you truly want me to be your Leader?"

Earsplitting howls instantly erupted from the camp, ringing in Dingo's ears. Every dingo in the wide camp leapt to their paws and threw back their heads in a wild, echoing cheer. Their eyes glowed with hope and their voices rang out with excitement.

Dingo gazed out at the canines before him with shining light brown eyes. Slowly, he glanced back at Saderia and Dash and grinned when he saw their warm, brilliant smiles. His eyes flicked to Thunder and glimmered with hope when he saw the knowing grin on the former Leader's face. Slowly, he turned away from Thunder and gazed at the open air right beside

him for what felt like ages. A shining, wispy figure floated in the air beside him, nearly invisible in the brilliant light of the sun. Her light brown eyes shone with pride. Tears glimmered in her eyes, and on her face was one of the brightest, happiest smiles he had ever seen. A soft, misty look crept into Dingo's eyes. Slowly, he tore his gaze off the ghostly figure and gazed down at the howling dingoes before him.

A strong, brilliant gleam of determination flashed in his eyes and a wide smile spread across his face. "Then I accept! From this moment on, I will be your Leader!"

Deafening cheers echoed through the camp. Dingoes leapt into the air all around camp and shouted with excitement, their voices ringing out over the entire desert. All of them gazed up at Dingo with bright, shining eyes full of hope and excitement.

Dingo gazed down at them with shining eyes and smiled. "For my first act as pack Leader, I would like to elect my new Second in Command." Flicking his eyes to the side, he met Thunder's gaze and let a grin spread across his face. "I think Thunder should have that job."

Thunder blinked in surprise and hesitated, then gave him a tiny nod. A faint smile crept across his face and his eyes glimmered with gratitude. "I accept."

Cheers of excitement reigned in the air. Saderia gazed up at Dingo with shining amber eyes. A warm, proud smile crossed her face. Tears pricked her eyes when she saw the brilliant smile on Dingo's face and realized his lifelong dream had finally come true. Catching her gaze, Dingo glanced at her and grinned, brushing his muzzle against hers. With shining eyes, he gazed at his two friends and let out a warm laugh. Seeing Dash's smile, he flicked him playfully with his tail and grinned when Dash swatted him back.

Chuckling to himself, Dingo just shook his head in amazement and gazed back at the cheering crowds with glowing light brown eyes. Sunlight shimmered down on the edge of the rock, lighting up his shaggy brown fur and glowing in his misty light brown eyes. A wispy spirit sat close beside him, her light brown eyes shining with pride and her ghostly tail twitching with delight. A brilliant light shone in Dingo's eyes. Sitting back on the platform, he threw back his head and let out a booming howl that echoed out over the sand dunes.

Slowly, every dingo in the camp threw back their head and let out their own howls until their wild, eager voices filled the entire desert. Every last canine cheered for Dingo, the new Leader of the pack.

Sunlight shimmered brilliantly in the sky, casting golden yellow light down on the huge procession moving through the desert. Saderia padded tiredly across the hot sand, her head drooping but her eyes still bright with relief. Beside her, Dash trudged clumsily across the hot grains, his eyelids drooping and his unruly dark brown mane slipping over his face. The entire army marched behind Saderia, their faces tired and their steps clumsy, but their eyes still bright with pride. All the forest animals crept wearily after her in the direction of the forest, eager to return to their families. Soft, tired murmurs rose up from the weary crowd, tinged with relief. Some forest animals pressed close together to support their injured comrades. Others laughed and bounded along eagerly, without a care in the world.

Dingo padded just a few paces away from her, his light brown eyes shining with pride. Not a hint of exhaustion haunted his determined gaze. His new pack followed tiredly after him, their tails drooping with exhaustion but their eyes bright. Most of them whispered excitedly to each other, their voices proud despite their weariness. In the bright light, their scars seemed less brutal and the dried blood on their fur less gruesome. All of them followed their new Leader as he led them in the direction of the forest.

Saderia let out a tired sigh and gazed at the land ahead with warm amber eyes. Dingo's new pack had to return to the forest one last time to pick up the dingoes they had left behind, like Bunny and the other canines who had been too old, too young, or too weak to fight. Not only that, but the new pack wanted to have their wounds treated by the forest healers and to say one final goodbye to the friends they had made in the war. All of them wanted to be there when Saderia's royal family made the announcement to the kingdom that their forest was once again theirs, as well. Later on that day, once everything was taken care of, Dingo would lead his pack back out into the desert to find a new camp for them to live in.

A heavy sigh escaped Saderia's chest and her eyes clouded with mixed feelings of happiness and regret. She could only imagine the cheers

that would fill the clearing when the forest animals learned they were free. After the announcement, though, friends would have to say goodbye to friends. Plenty of forest animals would be sad to say goodbye to their dingo companions. Maeta's niece, Tawny, and the strange dingo pup, Bunny, would be especially hard to separate. The two had been close friends since Bunny had arrived in the forest and had spent nearly all their time together. Getting them to say goodbye would be quite the task. A shadow flitted across Saderia's face and she felt a sudden pang of sadness. The hardest goodbye would come at the end of the day, when she, Dash, and Jeb would have to say goodbye to Dingo, who would leave to live in the desert.

Her eyes clouded, but a happy smile crossed her face. Out of the corner of her eye, she glanced at Dingo and smiled when she saw his brilliant grin. For the first time in a long time, his eyes weren't shadowed with pain and his smile was genuine. For the first time, he seemed truly happy. She could never take that away from him even if his leaving hurt.

Smiling to herself, Saderia held her head high and glanced back out of the corner of her eye. A brilliant glow lit up her amber irises. Behind her, Makero padded tiredly across the sandy ground. Several forest animals walked close beside him. Together, the King and the forest animals carried Karenisha across the sunlit desert. Draped over their shoulders, the Queen gazed around with wide, curious eyes. Confusion haunted her gaze, but a faint smile tugged at her mouth. As soon as they returned to the forest, Maeta and the other healers would see to her wounds. After that, time would be her biggest healer.

Taking a deep breath, Saderia turned away from her mother and glanced to the side to look at Dash. Her smile faltered when she saw the dull look in his amber eyes. A shadow flitted across her face and her eyes narrowed with wonder and unease. Dark thoughts swirled through her mind as she stared at her scarred best friend. Thousands of questions swirled through her mind, making her heart skip with unease and a dark sense of curiosity. Why had Dastarius appeared beside him on top of that ledge? Where had he *come* from?

A dark shadow of worry clouded her amber irises. Narrowing her eyes, she turned away from Dash, a deep frown spreading across her face. Dastarius had commanded Dash to *kill* her, just like the shadow figure had in her Dreams. Why had he done that? Why had he thought Dash *would* do

it? Her eyes clouded. Dash *had* saved her...but only after a long hesitation. Still, there were plenty of reasons he might have hesitated to save her. Rock had been on that ledge, after all. The old Leader might have attacked if Dash had tried to help her. Or maybe he had believed that Dastarius might hurt him. After all, Saderia knew that ghosts couldn't touch or harm the living in real life, but Dash might not know it.

Her eyes darkened and flicked to Dash's face. Confusion bubbled in her chest, making her eyes cloud and her mind whirl with unease. Where *had* Dastarius come from? Why had he appeared? Had Dash been talking to him in dreams the way she talked to Claw? If he had been...*why*? Why would he ever talk to his father after all he had done? And why exactly would Dastarius talk to *him*? What had his plan been and why had Dash gone along with it? The way Dastarius had commanded Dash to kill her without a hint of doubt unnerved her. It was as if he had expected Dash to go along with it. Why was that?

Confusion and unease burned in her mind. Deep down, she knew Dash would never hurt her, but she found it suddenly difficult to walk next to him. Even if she knew Dash wouldn't hurt her, she also knew Dastarius was sneaky and manipulative. How deep had he sunk his claws into Dash? And how long would it take to get him back to normal?

Her Dreams flickered through her mind. Her nightmares had tried to warn her, but she hadn't understood until it was too late. Now her confusing Dreams made too much sense. One Dream burned in her mind above all others. The Dream where she had seen the gruesome, bloody lake flickered through her mind. In the first part of the Dream, she had seen Rock's monstrous den with three hazy figures standing atop the jutting ledge. Before, she had had no idea who those figures were. Now it made perfect sense. The figure who had stood on the edge of the ledge had been Rock. One of the figures lurking in the shadows near the back of the ledge had been Dash. The other shadowy figure beside him must have been Dastarius. In the Dream, Saderia had been so focused on Rock that she had barely noticed Dash and Dastarius lurking in the background. That in itself was probably a hint. Just like in her Dreams, Saderia had been too focused on Rock and stopping his horrible plans to notice Dastarius sinking his claws into Dash in the background.

The gory lake from her Dreams flashed through her mind, sending a shiver down her spine. Dingo had been right the first time. The bloody ocean had been a metaphor to show how Rock's bloodlust was destroying the desert. Several deeper meanings had been embedded in that scene, though. While the other dingoes drowned in the scarlet lake, one figure had struggled to pull them out of the gore and had nearly fallen in himself. That figure had to have been Dingo. That part of her Dream had represented how Dingo would try to save the canines from drowning in their old Leader's bloodlust and nearly end up dying in the process. In the end, though, he had succeeded in saving them.

A darker meaning lurked in the last part of her Dream. A shiver raced through her when she remembered dangling from the ledge and looking up to see a dark figure clamp its paws over her own. In her Dream, she had felt a flash of betrayal at the sight of the shadowy figure. That figure had to have been Dash. In real life, he had clamped his paws over her own—only to save her, not to kill her as the Dream had implied.

One detail from that scene stood out in particular. When Dash had held her down in her Dream, he had been bleeding. Blood had poured out of some invisible wound in his shadowy body and filled the dreadful lake below her. In a flash of insight, she realized what that meant. The blood dripping from Dash's body was meant to represent *bloodlines*, as in his heritage. As in Dastarius. Dastarius's blood ran in his veins. The scene had been trying to tell her that Dastarius's blood would add to the destruction of the desert and probably the forest, as well. The dark lion must have used the fact that he was Dash's father to get closer to Dash and control him. That was what her Dream had been trying to tell her.

At the end of that Dream, an ominous voice had whispered eerie words in her ear. "*Kill her. Kill her now.*" No doubt that voice had belonged to Dastarius.

Other Dreams flitted through her mind, making her eyes darken with understanding. In some of her Dreams, Dash had appeared as a dark, hazy figure. When she had first had those nightmares, she had thought it was odd because in most Dreams, usually only animals she didn't know were shadowed. Now that simple fact held a darker meaning. Dastarius had most likely been talking to Dash and slowly changing him to suit his plans. As a result, Dash had become shadowed in her Dreams because she no longer

knew him, not after Dastarius had changed him. The friend she used to know was no more.

Grief stirred in her chest, but she forcefully pushed it away. Determination flashed in her amber eyes. She would find a way to fix the damage Dastarius had done. No matter what, she would make sure Dash was no longer just a shadow in her Dreams.

A dark shadow haunted Dash's eyes. His gaze flicked to Saderia's face, then instantly darted back to the ground. Pain and regret burned in his chest and he kept his eyes trained on the ground, too afraid to face Saderia when she could look over at him at any moment. He couldn't bear to look her in the eye. Now that everything had calmed down, only one concern would be weighing on her mind—Dastarius. Earlier, Saderia had told him that they could talk about it later. With all his heart, Dash hoped that she would give him a chance to explain and that he would find a way to explain something he himself didn't understand. He hoped she wouldn't hate him even though he already hated himself.

His head drooped with shame. A long sigh breathed out of his mouth and his eyes clouded. How could he have been so stupid as to trust Dastarius? To listen to him and do exactly what he wanted? How had he not realized it was all a plot to hurt Saderia? *Why* had he listened to Dastarius after all he had done? The thoughts swirled through his mind, making him wince in embarrassment. At the same time, a darker realization tickled the back of his mind. As much as he hated to admit it, Dastarius *had* helped him even if he had been using him. Without his plans, Rock might still be alive, Karenisha might still be locked up in Rock's camp, and the previous outcasts might still be in danger.

Guilt haunted his mind. Even though he knew Dastarius had been using him, he couldn't help but wish he could talk to him just one more time. After becoming so used to it, he almost couldn't fathom the idea of *not* talking to his father at night. During all those meetings, Dastarius had actually seemed to like him. Whether he had been using him or not, it had actually seemed like they were getting along and growing closer. They had laughed and talked together. After a while, Dash had felt at ease around him.

When his father had been alive, Dash had felt like he had to watch everything he said to make sure Dastarius didn't get angry. He hadn't felt that way during their dream meetings. In the shadowy clearing, they had talked about things they had never talked about in the past with a friendliness they had *never* had when Dastarius had been alive. One time, they had even mentioned Lolista and laughed, whereas in the past, any mention of the name 'Lolista' or anything that sounded remotely close got him in serious—and usually painful—trouble. Dash had actually started to think that they were finally getting along the way a father and son should. In the back of his mind, he had hoped his father would still visit him and talk to him even after the war was over...if only once in a while.

For once in his life, Dash had actually started to feel like he had a *real* father. He had started to believe that maybe Dastarius really *had* changed. That maybe he really *did* care. In the end, though, he was wrong. All of it had been nothing more than lies.

Dying rays of sunlight streamed out over the border, casting a fuzzy orange glow over the sand dunes and the short green grass. Saderia sat on the edge of the forest, her paws brushing the soft, fresh grass. A sad smile glowed on her face and her eyes shone with the last rays of light. Dash and Jeb sat close beside her, smiling weakly and gazing out at the desert with eyes shimmering with sadness. Behind them, Makero watched them with a grand, proud smile.

Dingo sat on the edge of the desert, his tail flicking lightly across the warm, grainy sand. His new pack stood several feet behind him, covering the sand dunes and watching their Leader with shining, excited eyes. A brilliant, radiant smile spread across Dingo's face and his eyes shimmered in the fading light of the sun. A peaceful silence hung over the border. The day had come to an end. Now it was time to say goodbye.

Saderia closed her eyes and pressed her face against Dingo's chest, her heart heavy with sadness but glowing with pride at the same time. "I'll miss you," she murmured.

"I know." Dingo gave her a weak smile and patted her lightly on her back. "I'll miss you too. But the dingoes have agreed to move our camp to a place closer to the forest. Once we get settled in, we'll be living pretty close to your land, so it will be a bit easier to see each other." His eyes

shimmered in the dying light. "Don't worry about it, Saderia. We'll still see each other as often as we can, even if we have to travel. I promise."

Saderia looked up at him and smiled, her eyes shining with hope. "Good." Her amber irises glowed with pride. "I just know you'll be a great Leader, Dingo."

He chuckled and gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks. I'm glad one of us thinks so." Glancing over Saderia's shoulder, he grinned and gave Dash a playful wave. "See you later, Dash! I'll try to find time to beat you up or show you up at something later!"

Dash rolled his eyes and managed a faint smile. "We'll see about that, Dingo." Letting out a soft sigh, he stepped closer and gave him a more humble smile. "Good luck with your new pack. I know you'll do great ruling the desert."

Dingo grinned and eagerly flicked his tail. "Thanks. I hope so."

Jeb stepped closer to Dingo and gave him a shy smile. "Bye, Dingo. I'll miss you. My Mom and Dad will, too. Thanks for helping us out all the time."

Dingo flicked his tail. "No problem, Jeb. I'll see you again soon." He paused, then glanced past them at Makero. Gratitude glowed in his light brown eyes and he dipped his head to the King. "Thank you for letting the dingoes stay in the forest, King Makero. We are in your debt."

Makero stepped up to the border and smiled, waving away his thanks with a flick of his paw. "It was my pleasure, Leader Dingo," he replied, dipping his head. "From now on, the forest and the desert will be allies. If you ever need anything, come to us."

"The same to you," Dingo replied, giving him a warm smile. When the King held out a paw, Dingo clasped it and heartily shook hands. "Goodbye, King Makero." Giving the King a nod, he glanced back at his three friends and gave them a bright smile. "I guess I'll see you guys soon. Until then, take care of yourselves and the forest."

Saderia grinned and flicked him warmly with her tail. "No problem. See you soon, Dingo."

"Bye," Dash called, giving him a faint smile.

Jeb squeezed up a shy grin and waved goodbye. "Bye, Dingo!"

Dingo grinned and dipped his head to them with a brilliant gleam in his light brown eyes. Giving them one last, lingering look, he slowly turned

around and padded back toward his pack. With a flick of his tail, he moved through the crowd of pack members to take his place at the front of the group. One by one, each of the dingoes fell into step behind him, hiding him behind an enormous crowd of canines. Slowly, the dingoes marched away over the sand dunes until the crowd disappeared into the simmering sea of dunes. Soon, they disappeared.

Saderia heaved a sigh and smiled a weak smile. “We’ll see him again soon.”

Jeb let out a soft, sad breath, his eyes clouding. “I hope so.”

Beside him, Dash just nodded and gazed out at the desert, his amber eyes clouded and shadowed. A thick silence spread out between the three of them as they stared out at the rolling sand dunes. After several long beats of silence, Dash slowly turned around and met Saderia’s gaze, his amber eyes shimmering with guilt and his ears drooping in shame.

“I...I’ll tell you everything that happened, Saderia. I promise.” He paused, then let out a sigh and gazed darkly at his paws. “If you’ll let me anywhere near you, that is.”

Saderia managed a weak smile and rested her tail gently on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Dash. I’ll listen.” She paused, then narrowed her eyes in a stern but kind gaze. “I do want to know everything, though.”

“Don’t worry.” Dash managed a weak smile and met her gaze, his eyes shining with gratitude. “You will.”

Saderia returned the smile and nodded her head. Taking a deep breath, she tore her eyes off Dash and gazed out at the horizon, her amber irises shimmering in the fading yellow rays of the sun. A brilliant glow of hope and happiness shone in her chest as she stared out at the peaceful, darkening sky. Her mother was safe. Healers were tending her wounds at that very moment. The forest was finally free from the sinister clutches of Rock. All of the ex-outcasts were free to live their lives without having to fear—as changed animals. Dingo had finally gotten to live out his dream as the new Leader of the pack and no longer had to hide in his own home. Everything and everyone was finally safe.

A radiant, dazzling smile lit up her face. At long last, she was finally back in her home, the way she should be. Finally, her mother was safe and had made it back to her home. Now, with her mother and everyone else safe, Saderia could finally enjoy her homecoming. Her eyes shone. Taking a

deep breath, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes, breathing in the soft, dewy scent of the forest and pricking her ears to hear the soft, peaceful chirping of the birds in the woods behind her. Her heart skipped with relief. She was safe. Her friends were safe. Her forest was safe. All of it was safe. Everything was finally back to normal!

Well...not quite. Saderia slowly lowered her head and glanced at Dash out of the corner of her eye, her amber irises darkening with doubt and unease. Worry rose in her chest and her mind clouded with questions. Even as doubts and confusion rose in her chest, though, she forced the anxious feelings away and let out a quiet breath. Heaving a soft sigh, she wrapped her tail tightly around Dash's and managed a faint, hopeful smile. Deep down, she knew Dash would never hurt her and that they could find a way to fix this mess somehow. Together, they would work through this nightmare, piece by piece.



Sarah Renée has loved writing from an early age. She has been writing short stories since the age of four, and at the age of ten, she came up with the idea for *The Tiger Princess*. She wrote the novel when she was twelve. She is fascinated with wild animals and the wild world outside her home and has an obvious great love of tigers. She enjoys spending time with her cats, reading, drawing, and playing her violin when she is not writing. In her free time, she is constantly daydreaming about her many characters, creating new ones, and coming up with interesting adventure story ideas. She is sixteen years old.

Visit www.thetigerprincess.com to learn more about Sarah Renée, her books, and more!

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Saderia Series Book 6:

Club Trouble

Beware an old enemy...

The war has ended, but memories of the battle still haunt Saderia and her friends. Even as life in the forest slowly returns to normal, Saderia is wrought with doubts. Will she ever be able to trust Dash again? Or is he truly no longer the friend she once knew?

While Saderia and Dash struggle to fix their broken friendship, old spirits become restless. Though the outcome of the battle was disastrous to him, Dastarius has never been one to give up. Unbeknownst to Saderia, he seeks out ancient secrets in the spirit realm - secrets that should have been kept buried. At the same time, another old enemy forms a dangerous plan - a plan to destroy Saderia and Dash once and for all...

Keep Watch for Saderia Series Book 6: Club Trouble

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